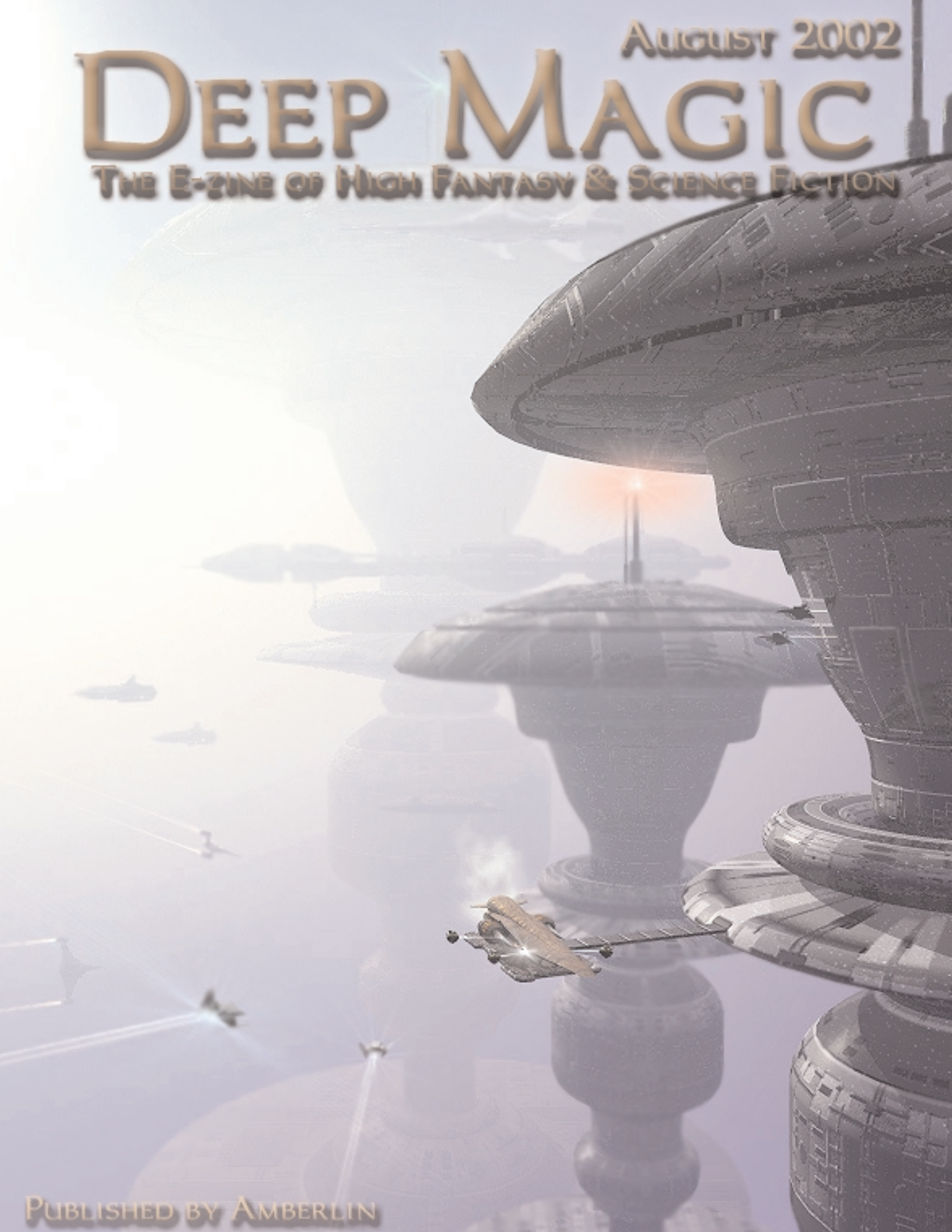
August 2002

Deep Magic

The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction



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If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to http://www.deep-magic.net where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will update our archived issues accordingly. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please send an email to feedback@amberlin.com, and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

The staff at DEEP MAGIC would like to welcome a new member to our volunteer staff: Rochelle Buck. She has joined our few but proud ranks as an associate editor. Welcome!

Deep Magic strives to produce and publish morally responsible art and literature. Although great effort has been made to refer our readers to like-minded websites, Deep Magic is not capable of controlling the content in other sites linked to or referrenced herein. Thus, Deep Magic encourages its readers to use their own discretion when visiting other sites identified on our site or in Deep Magic: The E-Zine of High Fantasy and Science Fiction.

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Note From the Editors

August 2002

It's already time for Issue 3 of DEEP MAGIC. Hard to believe it's happened so quickly. We have been pleasantly surprised at the interest in this e-zine so far. The downloads have far exceeded our expectations. We hope you keep coming back for more. Thus far, we have not received much feedback from you. We'll assume, therefore, that you're happy with what we're doing! However, please drop us a line any time with suggestions, comments, or even complaints. Email us at feedback@amberlin.com.

We have several items on tap for this month's issue. We offer the continuations for *Landmoor* and *Procyx*. In addition, we have a clever Science Fiction short called "What Power In a Word?" "Slaying the Dragon" is a funny piece of fantasy, and for you Fairy fans, we bring you "Amaryllis." Add to that a helpful article by Ays Marin and some ramblings from editor Jeremy Whitted, and we think you'll be happy with this issue. Beginning with this issue, we're adding even more artwork, starting with a creative piece by Thomas Floyd. Oh, and last but certainly not least, we have some fantastic science fiction art by Clay M. Hagebusch.

For August, we're also rolling out a new feature: the DEEP MAGIC Message Boards. Click here to go to the Deep magic boards. There may not be many posts to start, but don't let that stop you from being one of the first! We offer several forums, where you can post thoughts, comments, etc. on any of the stories, articles, artwork, or polls from the e-zine. You can also post messages for the authors of our features stories. In addition, we have a forum for posting feedback on the e-zine itself, or to leave messages for the editors. We hope you will go to the boards often.

One final thought: We are still looking for submissions. We have received a number of good stories and artwork, but we're looking for more. We can't have enough. Same goes for the writing challenge submissions. Don't be shy. If we don't print yours one month, try again.

That should about do it for this month. Enjoy the stories and artwork.

The Editors
DEEP MAGIC

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Poll: How Avid a Reader Are You?

Fantasy/SciFi Reading

How avid a fantasy/science fiction reader are you?

- Up to 1 book a year (I really prefer movies)
- 2-5 books a year (I'll make time for a few favorite authors)
- 6-12 books a year (I follow a handful of series and read regularly)
- 13-25 books a year (I'm a preferred reader at more than one store)
- 26-50 books a year (I wear out my library card every six months)
- 51+ books a year (No, seriously, I really read that much)

Results from the July 2002 Poll

What is the Best Fantasy Movie of the 20th Century? (results as of July 29, 2002)

Willow: 26.92%

Princess Bride: 21.15%

Conan the Barbarian: 19.23%

Excalibur: 11.54%

Other: 7.69%

Dragonslayer: 5.777%

Dragonheart: 3.85%

Beastmaster: 3.85%

Tied at last place: 0.00%
(Clash of the Titans
Dungeons and Dragons
Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger
Sword and the Sorcerer)

If you are reading Deep Magic, you either have a strong interest in fantasy and/or science fiction or you are related to someone published in this issue. We are glad you are here in either case. This month's poll asks information about the time and energy you spend on your fantasy/science fiction hobby/profession/casual interest/obsession. Thank you for taking the time to anonymously tell us a little more about yourself.

To take the poll, click on the poll box above. In addition to this one, we have a supplemental poll on our new message boards. You will be directed to it from the poll above. Please take the time to visit the message boards, take the other poll, and by all means post a message!

Writing Challenge

Our July writing challenge (see the bottom of the page for a recap) was a fun one, and we received some interesting submissions. Below you will find a list of the top selections, with links to what they wrote. We hope you enjoy them. More importantly, however, we hope that those who took the time to write something learned from the exercise. That is what the writing challenge is all about. So if you missed out last month, take a look below and take up our next challenge. Send your writing challenge submission to writingchallenge@amberlin.com. We will post the top selections next month. In the meantime, here are the July 2002 writing challenge top selections:

The Dragon's Accountant by Steve McCrary

Barry and the Three Locks by Anne M. Stickel

The Child of Prophecy by R.V. Saunders

August 2002 Challenge

This is an exercise to practice and improve character development. Your task is to describe an original main character in 250 to 500 words. The character can be male or female. Choose whatever setting you like; but the goal is to give the reader a sense of this character. Here is the twist to the challenge: You cannot start two sentences with the pronouns "he" or "she" in the submission (e.g. "He was a lusty looking fellow with gray eyes and a tattoo on his cheek. He a wore a loose-fitting..." this would be disqualified because two sentences begin with the pronoun 'He'). Remember, no two sentences can start with the same pronoun. We are also enforcing a rule that should always be followed unless you are compelled with the threat of imminent violence to violate it: you cannot use the device of a mirror (the character looks in the mirror at his/her own reflection and describes himself or herself). As always, be creative.

July 2002 Writing Challenge: In our June 2002 Issue, Robin Hobb wrote an excellent article about fantasy and science fiction clichés. Many new authors, and even quite a few experienced writers, fall into the trap of relying on clichés, which leaves their writing dull, stale, or even boring. Your assignment this month is to take a fantasy or science fiction cliché and make it new, fresh, and original. If you need ideas about what would be considered a fantasy cliché, read Ms. Hobb's article. If you enjoyed the movie Shrek, you probably enjoyed numerous fantasy/fairy tale clichés given a makeover. In this issue, "Beauty & the Beast" is another example of putting a new twist on old clichés. Give us your best shot in 500 words or less. We have high hopes that your submissions will bring smiles to the editors' faces.

Writing Challenge Selections

The Dragon's Accountant
By Steve McCrary

The accountant turned the flashlight on his watch. The dragon, despite having hibernated these last nine hundred years, had an affinity for time. The light moved back to the neatly organized stacks of gold. After all these months, it was still breathtaking to behold, and the accountant stared until his vision was blocked by enormous green scales.

"Well, how much do I have?" the dragon asked, getting right to business.

"About that, I have some good news and some bad news," the accountant said, resting a hand on the tall stack of papers.

"How much?" the dragon asked again. His eyes narrowed to tight slits and his smile descended to a frown.

"There are complications."

"You went into my many chambers and weighed the gold, silver, and bronze?"

"Yes, but bronze isn't worth what it once…" The dragon raised a menacing eyebrow, and the accountant fell silent.

"You appraised the jewels?" the dragon hissed.

The accountant nodded.

"You wrote your little numbers in your little ledger and added them all up?"

"Yes," the accountant squeaked.

"Then, I will ask you again. For the last time, how much?"

The accountant looked up into the big black eyes and said, "Eight hundred thirty-eight billion, five hundred fifty seven million, three hundred seventeen thousand, six hundred eighty-five dollars."

The dragon pulled himself up proudly. A self-satisfied smile appeared on his face, wavered, and drew to a concerned scowl. "That's a lot, isn't it?" he asked, moving his head in close.

"Oh, my dear yes."

The dragon beamed, showing long rows of sharp yellow teeth. "There, that wasn't so complicated, now was it?"

"Err, that wasn't the complicated part."

"What is the complicated part?"

"Fees, taxes, and lawsuits, the big three are right on your tail," the accountant said, nervously laughing at his own wit. "You are truly living in the new millennium."

"What do you mean?" the dragon asked.

"Right off the bat, there's the fee to my firm. Ordinarily, that would be two percent of net assets, but I was able to get that reduced to one percent, or roughly 8.4 billion. You mentioned that half of your accumulated wealth came to you upon the death of your father. Then you brought the whole thing over from England."

The dragon nodded, a bit confused.

"There is a rather stiff inheritance tax to go with the nasty emigration fees on the transference of important assets. Nine hundred years of accumulated property taxes, excise taxes, income taxes,

asset taxes, special taxes, room taxes, and, of course, penalties have come to quite a heady figure."

"Excuse me, room taxes?"

"Any covered dwelling which is comprised in excess of fifteen rooms is considered to be a hotel, and is subject to room taxes. It's all right here," he said, tapping the stack of papers.

"How much do I owe?"

"One trillion, two hundred eighty seven billion, and change. I am sorry to have to inform you that you are bankrupt."

Disgusted, the dragon sucked in a puff of air through his nose and shot out a stream of white-hot fire through its mouth.

The accountant dove behind a massive hunk of granite, peeking out to see that only a small piece of blackened ash remained of the stack of papers. He watched it float slowly down to rocky floor of the cave. "That won't help you with the lawyers," he said, peeking around the edge of the boulder.

"Lawyers?"

"I believe I mentioned the lawsuits. Word has gotten out about you. While I had never heard of Sharmock the Terrible, Miss Christina Merriweather is familiar with your past. She is suing you for the wrongful death of her great-great and so-on grandfather, one Olick Suffelstien. Similar suits have been filed by the relations of those who died attempting to slay you.

"After nine hundred years, it seems everyone has unearthed a distant relative charred by the rage of your youth, and is attempting to cash in. The entire town of Lockerby has hired counsel in a class action lawsuit against you for the hostile work environment your flaming flybys inflicted on their forefathers. The list goes on and on."

"These lawyers, they're here?"

"Yes, right outside the cave."

"By all means, show them in," the dragon said, pulling himself up again and drawing a deep breath.

Barry and the Three Locks
By Anne M. Stickel

"Grrowwwl!" Barry Bear had been sent to bed without his dinner. His room overlooking Enchanted Forest was on the top level of Tree House, the highest point in the forest. The lovely view and piney smell usually made him happy, but not now. He'd apologized to his parents, but he knew his stomach wasn't as forgiving as they were. At least they'd given him less of a punishment than he'd earned for leaving Enchanted Forest. He deserved to miss the Teddy Bears' Picnic for running off on his search.

"Forget Goldy Locks, Barry," Mama Bear had said. "You had best avoid that little thief. We should have complained to the Good Fairy, but Papa Bear's such a softie."

Papa Bear had only rumbled something from behind his copy of the Forest Times. It kind of sounded like "humans are nothing but trouble." Papa had his paw in the honey jar and his feet propped up, relaxing in his recliner. He'd decided to leave the scolding to Mama, since he'd already put in a hard day roaring at hikers and campers.

Tossing and turning in his cozy bed, Barry talked to a drawing he'd made of Goldy Locks. "I won't grow up into a big scary bear like Papa or a fuss budget like Mama. I'm going to find you,

Goldy, and be your brother. I think you came to our house because you weren't just hungry and tired; you were lonely like me."

Barry sniffed tears that trickled out of his big brown eyes and dripped off the end of his soft black nose. He fell asleep hugging Goldy's picture. Hours later, the full moon woke him. He could hear Mama and Papa snoring away in their beds.

"Tonight's the night. I'm outta here!" Barry dressed in a boy scout uniform that his Papa had found when he'd hurried a troop along one night. He snuck down from his room and made two honey sandwiches. He put them in his knapsack with some cookies and fruit, and waddled out the front door, down the path, and across the creek. His bear feet let him go quietly, and he tried not to splash too much when he forded the creek.

The moon lit a magical path for Barry to the Locks' house, just outside the Enchanted Forest. Barry sniffed his way to Goldy's room. He climbed in her window. She was so sound asleep he didn't want to wake her. Instead, he gobbled his sandwiches. Then he curled up to sleep on one of her pillows. That's when he changed.

The three Locks found a brown Teddy Bear in a scout uniform on Goldy's pillow in the morning. "That looks just like Baby Bear from the Enchanted Forest," said Goldy, picking up and kissing the stuffed toy. "Thank you, Mama and Papa!" Mr. and Mrs. War Locks only smiled and nodded. When Goldy was old enough she could change Barry back.

The Child of Prophecy
By R.V. Saunders

The boy stormed from the inn, slamming the door behind him. In an instant Branlar started after him, only to be held back by a firm hand on his arm.

"Let him go, Branlar." The mage's voice was textured by age and sorrow.

"Let him go? I'd rather die. The Child of Prophecy must be protected. He …' Branlar was silenced by the mage's glare. Suddenly aware of his surroundings, he waited until the common room's other occupants had turned back to their own conversations before resuming his plea, lowering his voice to an urgent hiss. "The Child of Prophecy must survive until his eighteenth, and claim the Empty Throne as his right."

"I know, I know", said the mage, "It's just that …," but Branlar wasn't listening. He had wriggled from the mage's hold and raced out into the night.

But he was too late. The boy was nowhere to be seen, and neither was the gray gelding that had been tied up outside the inn. With a curse Branlar turned back to the warmth.

This time he didn't bother to lower his voice. "Why did you have to tell him tonight? Why not wait another few days? He only buried his parents last month, and you tell him his mother had an affair with the old King. Have some tact, man." Branlar paused for a moment. "And now he's probably headed back down South on *my* horse. It'll be weeks before we find him again."

"I'm glad he's gone", said the mage, with bitterness. "You've seen what he's like. He's an uncouth, uneducated, spoiled brat. He doesn't deserve to be the Child of Prophecy."

"He may not deserve it, but he's the Child, the heir to the Empty Throne, whether we like it or not."

"Well I don't like it," said the mage, his eyes boring into Branlar's. "I've been thinking. Maybe we should find another Child of Prophecy."

"Find another one? But how? The prophecies point straight at him." Branlar virtually spat out the words, "*…he shall be born of a farmgirl, born a king ... in the land of Harran*."

"But don't you see?" the mage said, "There needs to be a Child of the Prophecy, but it needn't be him. I could make the prophecies refer to anyone. If I tell the people this person is the Child, they'll believe me, because I am the keeper of the prophecy. I can easily find another orphaned farmboy, fake his birthmark and start again. We will find a boy who is actually worthy of the prophecy."

He paused, noticing for the first time Branlar's look of disbelief. "What's wrong?" he asked.

For a moment Branlar said nothing. Then he lifted his eyes to the mage's, and spoke in a soft, clear voice.

"You do realise that's exactly what you said last time."

The silence hung heavily between them.

"And the time before that."

Slaying the Dragon

By M. Thomas

Sir Orevel arrived in the village of Entimido early on a Saturday afternoon and promptly announced his intention to kill the last dragon known to man. To their credit, the villagers did not laugh at him outright, but they did smirk a little.

"No one has ever killed that dragon," said the village mayor, an ancient little man with a brown apple face and very few teeth.

"I have all the latest equipment," Sir Orevel replied stiffly. "The dragon shall bother you no longer."

The villagers looked at one another.

"It doesn't really bother us all that much now," said the mayor.

"Dragons have been known to devour sheep and virgins the world over," Orevel warned him.

"Haven't had many of those here in a long time. Sheep, I mean." The mayor grinned. Some of the old women tittered behind their hands. "We mostly grow beans. Have you known many dragons, the world over?"

The young knight frowned. "A merchant I knew had the bones of a dragon in a box. I saw the bones."

"How big was it?" The mayor's eyes sparkled.

Orevel hesitated, then measured the air with his hands. The mayor peered intently at the space.

"'Bout the size of a trout?"

"It was a baby dragon."

"Right," said the mayor. "He had a mermaid in a jar too, I'll bet. Charged you three pennions to see the whole show?"

Orevel frowned and changed the subject. "I'll hire someone to carry my spear up to the valley."

"Who've we got?" The mayor turned to the crowd. They all shook their heads. Then one old woman stepped forward.

"Callie should do it."

"She should not," a voice came from the back of the crowd. "I don't have time to go slaying the dragon today."

The crowd parted to reveal a young woman with her hands on her hips. She was slightly smallish–as most women were supposed to be, Orevel reckoned–and had the normal amount of curves to be expected, as well as that disdainful expression he noticed most women got when men told them they were off to slay a dragon. Her eyes were green.

"I always have to carry the spears," she said. "I don't want to."

"It's for your own good," Orevel heard one older woman hiss. "This one looks like he might like girls. Hasn't got too many fancy curlies on his shield."

"Codpiece is a bit small though," the knight heard someone else mutter.

"It isn't the size of the turnip, it's the spice in the stew," another woman murmured sagely. There were consenting nods.

"It isn't a woman's place," Orevel said, his face burning. "A woman can't carry a spear. She'll

"Dragons have been known to devour sheep and virgins the world over," Orevel warned him.

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Clay M. Hagebusch

Mediums You Work In: 3D Computer Graphics
Educational/Training Background: B.A. Graphic Design
Schools Attended: Missouri Southern State College
Website URL: http://www.phase2.net/claygraphics

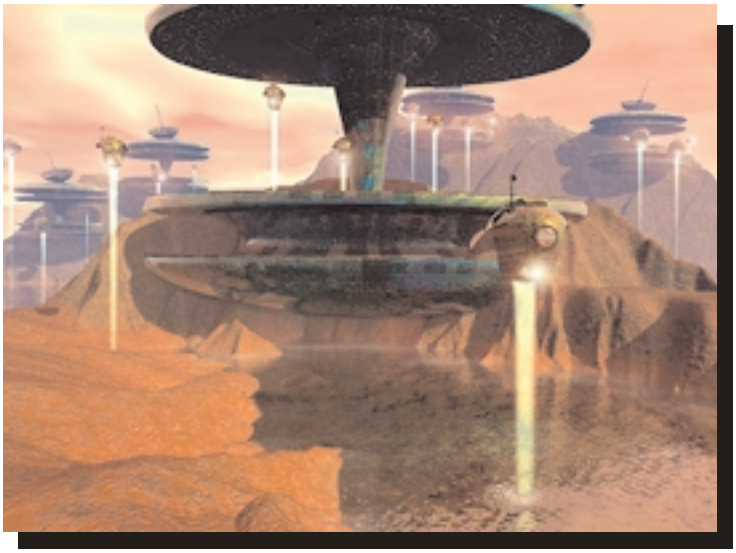
Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I have always been an artist since I was a child. I just started to act on my art and really develop my skills as an artist when I started college.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: Realistic Fantasy? heheh I just create what pops into my mind and is appropriate for the project I'm working on. Sometimes a job will call for photo realistic 3D work and other jobs want realistic, yet have a fantasy look and feel to it.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: From everything around me, wherever I am, something will always present itself as inspirational.

Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story)
A: It was inspired in part by Star Wars Episode 1. It's a scene from short movie called The Shahnra Project that I'm creating in my spare time. And it's of the rescue ship *The Montego* as it's fueling up and being repaired before its journey.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: I consider everything an influence. Other artists, nature, just everything really.



Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: Quitting my corporate job and becoming a freelance 3D animator and designer who gets to work on only the projects that interest me.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: There is a lot more interest in Sci-Fi and Fantasy nowadays I think, especially in the movie industry. As software becomes more advanced in what it can do, more and more people are creating the visions they've had stowed away in the heads but didn't know how to get it out for everyone else to see. The possibilities are literally endless. So as a trend I see more and more people, artists and non artistic, creating anything they can imagine.

Crit Thyself:
blunders, blandishments and mechanical faux pas in the rough draft
By Ays Marin

So it's happened. There it is, on your desk: the six billion pages and umpteen zillion words, double-spaced in twelve-point standard font, or perhaps it's still spanning seven disks and a laptop. But it's there, all umpteen zillion words. Your brainchild, the parasitic life form that has hooked itself to the base of your skull for decades, the random idea you hacked out in two weeks' time.

As the case may be, it's still there: be it your novel, your short story, your article or the letter of apology to Auntie Margaret because you accidentally toasted her house when you left the microwave on for the weekend when you snuck in at night (while she was gone) to watch football. Complete. And rough.

Oh, is it rough. After the initial exuberance, even you realize it. But it's your brainchild, your parasitic lifeform, your random idea, and you want to make something of it.

So you edit. With knife, band saw and micropipette, you pluck, seeking to make something that others can understand as well as read. And that brings us past the introduction to the point: what are a few of the things you should look for?

Does anyone know what 'cerise' actually looks like?

Excessively Applied Adverbs

Example: *She wore a lovely dress of silky pink taffeta, its prettily pressed length a charming addition to her blushing cerise cheeks and delicately arranged blond curls.*

Does anyone know what 'cerise' actually looks like? Is it a red-pink or a pink-red? Regardless, the example overdoes the adverbs just a bit. Fortunately, the world of synonyms and editing provides cures for such things:

Revised Example: *She wore a beautiful dress of silky pink taffeta, its pressed length a charming addition to her blushing cheeks and the delicate arrangement of her blond curls.*

Of course, there are instances where adverbs are desirable, and an individual's writing style factors into the balance. If one writes flowing, graceful sentences, one probably will write flowing, graceful adverbs into it. If one writes quick drama, one probably won't want many adverbs. To have one's con-man 'gracefully dive beneath the staccato spray of bullets' is to make one's con-man sound like he's wearing a leotard and has just been interrupted onstage. A note of thumb: try no more than three adverbs per page. One is really more than enough, but. . .

He-He-He Syndrome

Example: *He walked the six blocks to the supermarket. He was going to buy some lotion, but as he turned onto the aisle, he bumped into Miss Pinafore, she of the silky pink taffeta and rosy cheeks, and all thoughts of*

everything flew out of his head. He stuttered, apologised, and extricated himself while trying not to disturb the folds of her new (green) dress. "Hi," he said.

Not only is that an example of atrocious narrative, but it also demonstrates the He-He-He syndrome quite well: three sentences and a dialogue tag starting with he. Fortunately, this sort of blot needs only a little surgery before it is presentable to an audience (hopefully one who likes pink taffeta and boy-meets-girl-in-supermarket plots).

For the sake of revision, He's name is Vladimir.

Revised Example: *Sorely in need of lotion, Vladimir walked the six blocks to the supermarket. As he turned down the cosmetic aisle, however, fate had him collide with Miss Pinafore, she of the silky pink taffeta and rosy cheeks, and all thoughts of everything flew out of his head. Stuttering out an apology, Vladimir extricated himself, trying not to disturb the folds of her new (green) dress. "Hi," he said.*

Still frightening, but the disease has been cured. Now we only have to deal with that taffeta.

Note: He-He-He Syndrome includes, and is not exclusive to, She-She-She Syndrome, It-It-It Syndrome, and The-The-The Syndrome. And Many-Many-Many-Other-Word syndromes.

It should be noted, however, that good judgment must be used in all instances of surgery. There are places where this manner of repetition is deliberate, for reasons of pacing and suspense. Example:

He waited.
And waited.
And waited.
And waited.
In fact, he was still waiting when the floor blew itself out from beneath him. His last thought, far from deep, was: 'Well, at least I won't have to wait any longer.'

Whether "waited" or "and" is the repetition could be debated. He-He-He Syndrome does not limit itself to beginnings, but in this case it was meant for suspense—whether it succeeded or not, well…

Too. Much. Punctuation, (or too little).

Comma-itis. Yes, the dreaded compulsion to put commas everywhere, even where they might not be needed. Especially where they might not be needed.

Example: *Yesterday, the large, blue Smellrag sailed out into the sea, and for its lunch, devoured several barnacles of a rather, crusty sort.*

Visualise the Smellrag as a sort of automated racing boat that has developed its own intelligence. Right now, it is being held up by all sorts of commas floating on the water.

Revised Example: *Yesterday, the blue Smellrag sailed out to sea. For its lunch, it devoured several barnacles*

of a rather crusty sort.

Of course, there is the inverse problem of punctuation: too little.

Example: *Yesterday the large blue Smellrag sailed out into the sea and for its lunch devoured several barnacles of a rather crusty sort.*

A good remedy for comma-itis is –yes– reading aloud, and maybe even to a live audience (gasp, choke, shudder). This live audience, of course, can be your dog, cat, cockatoo, ferret or Tasmanian devil. Find your natural pauses and insert the needed punctuation there, and take it out wherever it's not needed. It's not a perfect way, but it's worth a try. Don't be afraid to chop out a few extra descriptive words if they're bogging down the aerodynamics of the entire sentence. They can always be put somewhere else if you must have them.

Awkward sentences

Awkwardness is one of the offshoots of Too Much Punctuation. They are sentences that, through mind fart or accidental intricacy, are incomprehensive to anyone but yourself.

Examples:

Mind fart: *She struck the stones together and came out.*

Intricacy: *Leaping the boulder, with one hand she reached out and caught the leprechaun by the head, only to howl, drop it, and draw her injured digits back when he, open-mouthed, bit her.*

These are things that tend to be harder to notice than, say, excessive description—largely because you wrote the story and know every meaning by heart. This is when it's good to find dedicated readers (at Critters, or the former Del Rey workshop, or a home-grown face-to-face group), who don't know your every meaning by heart and might not even want to. When you do find an awkward sentence, the problem is rendering it simplistic—or just remembering what you meant in the first place.

Revised examples:

Mind fart: *She struck the stones together and a djinn came out.*

Forgot that key word, didn't I? Now, the other version could have meaning too, but. . .

Intricacy: *Leaping the boulder, she caught the leprechaun by the head, only to howl and draw back when he bit her.*

Too Much Capitalization

You might have noticed some instances of Too Much Capitalization throughout here. After all, who

really needs to capitalise "Too Much Capitalization" when it's not being used as a subtitle? Capitalization gives an object importance, be it a place, a thing, a person—any sort of noun. If one does some research, one can find manuscripts where the writers tend to capitalise every other word; some of those English explorers and missionaries were very fond of that. However, now the English language uses capitals a bit less often—at least, in literature. Those acronyms…

Err. The problem with Excessive capitalization is that when One uses It, the Rhythm tends to Draw the Reader off the Story Plot and into the Pretty Font. One of the habits that writers sometimes develop is the capitalisation of everything they consider important. Not just people and places, but things—every part of their magic system, for instance, or every race outside of the human one.

Example: *You might have noticed some instances of Too Much Capitalization.*

Revised example: *You might have noticed some instances with too much capitalization.*

Fragments

Fragments are sentences that don't stand on their own. If you have spell-checker, it is suspected that you have been attacked by those little green underlines on many an occasion. The problem is that some fragments are very much intended.

Unintended example: *The elf. Went to the store and found Vladimir and Miss Pinafore holding hands.*

All right, most people don't fragmentalize (is that a word?) like that. It's fairly clear that the two sentences just need to bond with each other.

Intended example: *Bloody-!*

Deliberate fragments can be a single word, or just a few, meant to give the story some dramatic rhythm. A single name, for example, can introduce the hooded figure sneaking around a petunia garden: Fred the Assassin. Can you not picture it?

Another intended example: *Miss Pinafore slipped to her window and looked out. A hooded figure danced over the petunias on her lawn. For a moment she thought it was her beloved Vladimir coming to visit, but then long fingers reached up to drop the hood, reflecting the face in the glare of streetlights. It was Fred. Fred the assassin.*

Nice drama, hm?

The End

Now it's happened; you've finished revising. The whole revised pile lies before you. Pleased, you turn the first page. . . and the second page. . . and the third page. And suddenly, you're on your second revision. Or your third. Or your forth. Or your fifth. . . .

Ays Marin has yet to add any publishing credits to her name, a fact that probably renders her as an untrustworthy and dubious source at best, but she has finished and revised her first novel and is ploughing through her second (and outlines for the third, and fourth, and fifth...)

Editor's note: She has also been one of the top reviewers on the Online Writing Workshop more months than we can count, and her feedback on the latest draft of LANDMOOR was invaluable.

What Power In a Word
By Alexander R. Brown

The young man sat in the bus writing furiously. With a rapidity and energy born of inspiration, his hand flew across the page, setting down in ink the images that were flashing through his mind. Letter followed letter, word followed word, each notch of ink on the paper building into paragraphs of text that soon filled the white sheet. One sheet was thrown back, revealing another blank page upon which the writer could inscribe his ideas, his thoughts, and his inspired vision.

Sitting in the back of the bus, seemingly looking out into the world flying by behind the glass window, two men secretly studied the young man. They recorded every movement meticulously with their photographic memories, available for future study by the miracle that was holothought. One man was tall and thin, sporting a neatly kept goatee and wearing sweat pants, a t-shirt and a trench coat. The other, who was short and fat, wore army fatigues beneath an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt. Both wore sunglasses and both tried to pretend as if they did not know each other. It was obvious to anyone that the two did not belong on the bus. They looked as if they belonged in an asylum. But the young writer remained oblivious.

Joshua Burns, the short fat one, peered over the top of his glasses, trying to get a good look at the young man who was rapidly shaping the future of the planet. Though Isaac Walker had no idea himself, the ideas that he was setting down on paper, the stories that he was telling with the ink from his two-cent Biro pen, would change the face of mankind for centuries to come. His clear, well-written prose would find an audience of millions. His ideas of a future in which peace and prosperity were the bywords, in which the poor and the sick were helped rather than pushed further into the mud, would resonate in a society so bereft of common values and hopes. His dreams would become the dreams of billions of people all over the world. And, in about two hundred years, they would form the basis of a new society.

...this young man, so normal looking, even a little plain, would actually have such an impact on the world.

It was amazing, Burns thought, that this young man, so normal looking, even a little plain, would actually have such an impact on the world. Burns had been very amused to see him checking out the girls who boarded the bus with him, looking longingly after them as they walked to the end of the bus and sat down. Neither girl gave him a second look. Burns guessed how much that must have hurt. He knew that if it hadn't been for the very ideals that Walker was setting down on paper this very minute, he probably would never have met and married his wife, Linda. People in Walker's time were much more interested in looks than personality, in the outer appearance instead of the inner beauty. It was the many stories and poems that Walker would write in years to come, each one set in his fictional world of Iterra, that would lead to people developing a new take on what life was about.

As Walker looked out of the window, studying the trees flashing past and the way the sun glistened on the river, Burns allowed himself a closer look. Craning his neck, he peered over the heads of the people who sat in front of him, trying to catch a glimpse at the words on Isaac's page. He almost stumbled, catching himself on the chair in front. The young woman who was sat in the chair looked up sharply, casting a fierce glare at Burns. Joshua was surprised. Such expressions of

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Best Fantasy Movies
by Jeremy Whitted

I had better start by giving you my email address (jwhitted@amberlin.com). I'm sure some of you will want to email me to tell me how crazy I am for the list I am about to present.

The poll we did last month (The Best Fantasy Movies of the 20th Century) has yielded some personally surprising results. I thought I'd write an article about my favorite fantasy movies in rebuttal... I mean, response. I'm not really sure where to start, so I'll begin with some guidelines. There exists some significant debate as to what constitutes fantasy. For the purposes of this article, I defer to the traditional: Magic, Wizards, Swords, Good vs. Evil--that sort of thing. However, even that leaves a lot to debate. So let's whittle it down a little more. I'll start by eliminating animation. That rules out Disney movies like Hercules, Aladdin, the Sword in the Stone, and the Black Cauldron. It also scratches movies like Shrek. Although this leaves out the original animated Lord of the Rings movies, that's fine, because they were pretty terrible anyway. No one will miss those from the list. As with animation, movies like The Dark Crystal, Labyrinth, and The Neverending Story will be exluded. I, personally, enjoyed these movies, but puppets are also out for this consideration. Finally, I'm eliminating what I call the "modern fantasy" genre. I don't know how to explain it very well, but I'll give Brazil and The Fisher King as examples. Let me say first that both are excellent (if not bizarre) movies. Terry Gilliam (who made Brazil) is an excellent filmmaker, and movies like Brazil, Time Bandits, and 12 Monkeys have redefined "modern fantasy" in my mind. But I'm going to leave them out of this discussion. Movies like Jumanji also fit into this category. Oh, and before I hear from some of you, comic book movies are out, too. Besides, they aren't fantasy by any definition I've seen.

Now that I have a manageable database of movies to work with, let's get going, in no particular order. By the way, at the end of the article, I listed my personal 10 favorite Fantasy movies. Skip ahead if you are so inclined.

Do I even need to explain the merits of The Lord of the Rings? I'm sure there are those of you who weren't as enthralled with this recent movie as most, but I feel that, even if you don't like what was or wasn't included in the movie, it should still be considered the greatest fantasy movie ever made. It has completely changed future expectations for how fantasy should look on screen. If you disagree, feel free to state your case. Harry Potter would also have to go along here. It's not at the very top of my favorites list, but it's just so well done that it has to be considered one of the best... even if you think it's a devil-worshipping story that is corrupting our children.

Dragonslayer is undoubtedly where my list will split from everyone else's. Before LotR, Dragonslayer (starring Peter MacNichol of Ally McBeal) was, in my mind, the best fantasy put to screen. It has a traditional story, a solid setting for the genre (it wasn't clean and pretty - dark and dirty is what I like), and the best Dragon yet to appear on screen. "What?" you say. Dragonheart had a much better dragon! Well, later in the article you'll hear my thoughts on that movie. But I really liked the treatment in Dragonslayer. For one, they did to it what the movie Jaws did for the shark. You never really saw the dragon for much of the movie. Unlike Jaws, though, when you did see it, it was still impressive. I watched it recently and still feel is holds up to today's standards.

I have to combine all the Sinbad/Jason movies: Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger, The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad, The Golden Voyage of Sinbad, Jason and the Argonauts, etc. They all come from the same era of fantasy movie-making: the claymation/stop-motion. All of these are great films (my

favorite being Eye of the Tiger). They have great action, cheesy costumes, and creatures that are both comical and wonderful at the same time. After watching these, part of me laughs at how cheesy they are while the other part thinks they were just great.

I wasn't sure, at first, if I should include Excalibur as a fantasy movie, but with the strong magic elements (Merlin, Excalibur, the Lady in the Lake, etc.), I had no choice. And that's fine by me, because it has long been one of my favorite movies. Next to LotR, it easily has the best effects and most realistic setting. The story was strong (though altered for the movie) and familiar; who hasn't heard the Arthurian legend? It did drag in spots, but the actors did a solid job, and the filmmaker turned out a top-notch movie. (I should note here that since I'm including Excalibur, I should also include Monty Python and the Holy Grail - but that would be unfair to all the other movies. Besides, it's a list all on its own.)

Conan the Barbarian, and to a much lesser extent Conan the Destroyer, should certainly be high on any Fantasy list. The first one was far superior, and it was a fantastic movie. The action was great (it is Arnold, after all) and the setting perfectly done. The casting was dead-on, the story familiar, and the movie as a whole thoroughly enjoyable. Similar to Conan, though not nearly as good, you will find Red Sonja, Kull the Conqueror, and the likes. It's not that they're bad movies, especially Kull. Just not as good.

Willow, it turns out, is a favorite of yours, judging by last month's poll. Something about this movie has always bugged me, but since I can't nail it down, I won't dwell it. It was, despite all, a very good movie. It has a great fantasy backdrop, good action, humor, and a very fantasy-like story. I have no real complaints. It was just a solid movie.

I love Clash of the Titans. Who doesn't? Similar to Sinbad, I laugh at it while enjoying it at the same time. It tells of familiar Greek legends and does it well. They also created a very good setting. Claymation was used for many of the monsters, just like the Sinbad movies, but it still looked fine. This movie is definitely a classic.

By simply mentioning Dungeons and Dragons, I'm sure I'll receive flack. After all, this was a totally stupid movie, right? Well, not for me. It was nothing earth-shattering mind you. But it was fun. Maybe it was the playing D&D as a kid, but I just enjoyed it. The acting was bad, the effects were a little too computerized, the story was canned - and yet I liked it. It is, at least, about as fantasy as you can get.

Beastmaster definitely deserves some recognition. I should have lumped it in with the Conan-like movies, but I didn't. This was a good film for the genre. A bit of a Conan rip, yes, but it has some great fantasy elements. Or maybe it was because of Tonya Roberts. Who knows?

Princess Bride is another classic. Not sure what else to say about it. It was great. It is one of the most-quoted movies of all times. You don't believe me? Inconceivable.

If it weren't for the lame soundtrack, Ladyhawke would be a much better movie. And other than that, it was a very good movie. It's borderline fantasy, as there was little magic involved (other than the curse) and, I believe, it was set in medieval England. But I'm going to throw it in because (1) Matthew Broderick was very good and very funny (2) it had a good fantasy-like story (3) Michelle Pfieffer.

And how can I forget Erik the Viking (starring Tim Robbins)? A thoroughly silly movie that most hated, yet I still loved. I was always a fan of Tim Robbins, and I thought the movie was quite funny. Besides, I needed an entry from the Norse mythos.

Another movie I grew up watching (and I saw it again before writing this article) was The Sword and the Sorcerer (starring Lee Horsley of TV's Matt Houston). What a great fantasy movie.

Not as cheesy as some, more so than others. But you have to like his sword! If you haven't seen it, rent it.

I rented several movies to prepare for this article, and I was surprised at my reaction. For instance, I found that I really liked Legend (with Tom Cruise). The costumes and effects were quite good, and it was wonderfully sappy. It watched more like a fairy tale, but I still enjoyed it (not that I have anything against fairy tales, mind you). I also rented Dragonheart. I think Sean Connery and Dennis Quaid should be ashamed of themselves for this one. Part of what ticked me off was that with the actors and money that went in to it, it should have been so much better. But the story was horrible, the acting sub-par, and the effects wasted. Sure, the dragon was nice to look at, but it was a terrible treatment. The dragon became more a pet or sidekick than a fearsome creature. I was disappointed to say the least.

Then there was Krull. The final movie I rented. I'm all for a good B-movie. Heck, a Mystery Science Theater 3000 version of this would have been awesome. But this is one movie that just shouldn't be watched. Unless you want to see Liam Neeson in a role I'm sure he'd just as soon forget. I quote the immortal words of our great modern philosopher, Bart Simpson: "I didn't think it was physically possible, but this both sucks and blows." I want my 99 cents back.

There are certainly other good movies out there. I'm sure there are some I didn't mention because I just don't consider them to be true Fantasy (any Robin Hood fans out there?). I saw a website that listed as Fantasy movies like Braveheart, Highlander, and 13th Warrior. Not Fantasy in my book. I also failed to discuss many sequels (that was on purpose).

So, am I way out there? Email me and let me know what you think. What did I leave out? Why am I crazy? Oh, and for my final Top 10, here they are:

1 Lord of the Rings
2 Dragonslayer
3 Sinbad et al
4 Conan
5 Sword and the Sorcerer
6 Harry Potter
7 Clash of the Titans
8 Excalibur
9 Willow
10 Beastmaster

I really confused myself with this list. I thought for sure I'd put Excalibur higher. And the ones I left off! Princess Bride (I'm still ticked I didn't put it on there), Ladyhawke, Erik the Viking, Dungeons and Dragons, all great movies (in my own mind). Man, I really make myself mad sometimes. Also, I really wanted to watch The Archer: Fugitive From the Empire before writing this article, but I couldn't find it anywhere (and I wasn't about to spend $35 on it). I heard it had a cool bow in it.

Note from the other Editors: the wild ramblings in this article do not reflect the opinions of the other editors. Bonus points to the reader who writes the best scathing e-mail to Mr. Whitted (and remember, it's jwhitted@amberlin.com). If it's good enough, maybe we'll include it in the e-zine next month.

Amaryllis
By Rebecca Shelley

I dragged into my cubicle on Monday morning and found that the amaryllis had bloomed over the weekend. The first of two white blossoms stretched out luxuriously almost eight inches wide. The plant was really going to be hard to hide now. I thought it had been a problem when the stem shot up two feet tall.

Now don't get me wrong. I don't go around breaking regulations at work normally. I'm a model employee. But Grandma Herschel sent me the bulb and my roommate is allergic to just about any flowering plant. So the amaryllis came to work with me.

We never talked about Grandma Herschel much when I was growing up.

"Crazy old woman, lives alone in a run down cabin that's been in the family since before electricity and indoor plumbing," Dad said once. That's all I ever heard.

I haven't been to that cabin or met Grandma Herschel. She never sent me so much as a birthday card before this, so the amaryllis was somewhat a surprise. Now that I had her address off the box the amaryllis came in, my curiosity about her, which had been suppressed since, flared up again.

I gave the plant a drink and sat down at my cramped workstation.

Were those quarter inch sized hand-prints on my moni-tor, or had someone splashed soda on it?

"What the…?" Tiny dots of dirt spread across my keyboard as if someone had taken a cotton swab dipped in mud from the amaryllis and attempted to make miniature footprints over the shift key, across A through G, and then up past the U, 9, and F10 keys. Were those quarter inch sized handprints on my monitor, or had someone splashed soda on it? Drinks aren't allowed in the cubicles either.

I reached for a tissue from the shelf above my monitor to wipe off the offending soda spots. Then froze. Someone had made miniature snow angels in the layer of dust over my four years out of date *Writer's Market*.

Standing on my toes, I glanced over the dividers at my fellow employees. No one so much as giggled or smirked. They were hard at work. I was… well… having a hard time getting to work.

Checking to see that the amaryllis was still far enough back that it wouldn't be seen on the overhead camera monitoring the room, I sat back down and began to scrub at my computer screen. The smudges came right off. Not soda?

Coughing the smog from the morning commute out of my lungs, I began to work.

The next day, I wiped muddy footprints from the papers in my endlessly full in-box. And wiped tiny finger prints from every square inch of my monitor. *Maybe I should change my screen saver from Nature to Underwater*, I mused. Obviously some kind of insect had taken up residence in my too small cubical.

Two days later my amaryllis was droopy. The bloom that had opened on Monday was closed and no amount of watering brought it back open. There were no more footprints or fingerprints,

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Imagination

by Thomas Floyd

from the collection of

Irene Beyer

www.thomasfloyd.com

In this and future issues of Deep Magic, we would like to introduce a new feature highlighting other fantasy and science fiction artists. Artwork can be a crucial component to firing up the imagination. How many times have you wandered down an aisle at Barnes & Noble -- or your local bookstore if you hate corporate giants -- and browsed the cover art before deciding to open and sample the first page? How many times have you been disappointed by the cover art chosen by publishers for the latest book by your favorite author? Increasingly, artwork is becoming more digital as technology makes it more and more difficult to tell what medium was used to create the scene. In Deep Magic, you will find artists that labor painstakingly with oil brushes, waiting for the colors to dry before they can dab the next hues. And you will find the latest in 3D animation software at work. Regardless of the medium, these images help add flavor and texture to the genre. After all, a picture is worth a thousand words. For good, or bad.

We think that this piece by Thomas Floyd illustrates the power that reading and art have in bringing out the magic of imagination. Send us the URL to your favorite artists or post them on the Deep Magic Message Board. Who knows -- maybe you will find their work on a future cover or feature inside Deep Magic.

continued from Issue 2

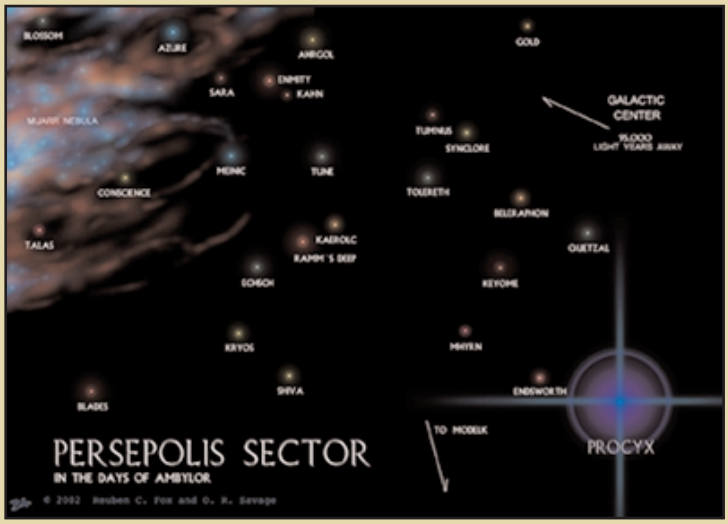
Procyx
Chronicle of the End Star of Grief
Book One: Days of Destruction
by O.R. Savage

CHAPTER TWO
Hypermotility

Adrenaline exploded inside Palmer. He suddenly saw things in sharper focus and there was a slight ringing in his ears. He went to the window. The skies to the east began graying wildly like time-lapse photography. Bizarre clouds spawned and gyrated driven by demonic winds. They loomed and billowed like a cancerous wall that churned higher with each passing moment.

"Type two Hypermotility," Palmer said under his breath. "We have a few hours--three at least." The delicate water column that stood at the center of Stonehenge began to dissimulate. The colors in it darkened leaving only the natural shades of water. It suddenly came home that this was the end. He felt the sudden urge to relieve himself. He headed for the rest room and took care of that before heading out of the building.

The lobby was a storm of purpose. Men and women hurried about, carrying equipment and files of library cubes. Only Evanna sat relatively calm, coordinating communication with the widespread sections of the base still in operation. Palmer dodged two men as he approached her.



click on map to view larger image

"Lieutenant," he began, but she put up her hand, straining to hear something being spoken to the biotranz implanted in her head. He waited until she looked up at him. Her face was pale, her eyes large.

"Colonel, I just got a message from the ferryship--they're in trouble."

Palmer maintained an outward semblance of calm. "What kind of trouble?"

"I just heard a report of trouble. They were going to elaborate but Hypermotility's scrambling everything. We can't hear anything through the planet."

"Can you still send a message outside the system?"

"As long as it's not through the planet." She paused, straining to hear again. "Yes,

I'm still picking up deep space chatter, but it's way down."

"Tranz the Fed base on Modelk. Tell them we're in Hypermotility. We need a relief ship, a Titan battle transport if they can spare one. If we have to detour, I don't know how close we may have to get to the Mhyrn system. All we need is to stray into their space."

She nodded, turning to her console.

"Oh," Palmer interrupted, "and contact Cosgrove in the shuttle. Tell him to get the Ahrgolians back here as soon as possible. There's no time for them to bring any personals, just themselves. And let's hope we have a ferryship waiting here when they arrive." He thought briefly. "Don't send that last part. Cog's got enough to worry about without having to deal with that, too."

She nodded, turning to the console. Her hands were trembling.

"You going to be all right?" Palmer asked. She nodded, closing her eyes to send.

A deep, stuttering rumble hummed up through the floor. Light fixtures started to swing. "Quake!" Palmer yelled and grabbed at the counter. It buzzed beneath him, offering little support. "Get under the table," he shouted. Evanna started to move. A loud crack released a huge beam that swung from the ceiling and slammed into Evanna's table. The beam shattered it like paper before hitting her. He heard a startled cry, then silence. Palmer tried to get to her but the quake shook him to the floor. He groped for some sort of shelter, yelling at the ground, screaming at it to stop shaking. Glassteel buckled and shattered into a spray of countless tiny missiles. Palmer covered his head. The pellets stung against his arms and legs.

The quake stopped. Palmer rushed to where Evanna lay trapped beneath the beam. There was creaking from above and the sound of crackling debris loosened by the quake. He pulled at the beam with all his strength, but it wouldn't budge. He threw the table aside, trying to get behind the beam to push it. He felt it give a little. Hill appeared at one of the shattered windows.

"Help me," Palmer shouted and Hill was there. They pushed until the beam gave way. It fell with a loud clanging.

Evanna lay utterly still. Her reddish hair covered her face like a shroud. Her head angled in an unnatural way. Her neck was terribly discolored from internal hemorrhaging. Palmer reached over to feel for a pulse. There was none. He looked at Hill who only stared.

"Let's get going," Palmer said quietly.

"We going to carry her to the ship?" Hill asked, and Palmer shook his head. "We don't have time. After we get everything on board the ferryship, and if the world's still stable enough, we can send some surrogates to retrieve her. We have too much to do to get ready for lift off. I'm sorry. I wish it could be otherwise."

Hill looked at Palmer with a strange expression. It passed. "Yes, Colonel," he said and was off again.

Palmer looked at Evanna again, hating himself. Turning, he headed outside.

One of Stonehenge's massive trilothons with its crossbeams lay toppled in burning ruin. A murky, charcoal twilight engulfed the heavens in a dark curtain of dust and debris spreading across the stratosphere from beyond Stonehenge. Its' source lay well beyond the horizon. Palmer stared in fear-drenched fascination. Scale was difficult to calculate, but the event that spawned it must have been cataclysmic. Palmer wondered if part of a continent had exploded or perhaps an asteroid had hit, thousands of kilometers away. The shock wave would hit soon unless Hypermotility were holding the energy. It was not unheard of. Palmer tranzed a general message about it, but command replied awareness of the event. They even tranzed him a satellite image. There was a shock wave. But it wasn't going anywhere. It just stood still--a ring of churning fire encircling a dirty, billowing,

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Landmoor

by Jeff Wheeler

XII

The conversation with Jaerod changed Thealos' entire point of view. He barely slept that night, thinking again and again about what he had been told. When dawn came, he rose early, washed in the river, and hurriedly prepared to leave. He had never felt such a pressing urgency, not even in his desire to abandon Avisahn. If he could make it to Landmoor and grab the talisman, he would have the proof he needed to thrust in Nordain's face. No – he wouldn't bother with Nordain. He would go to Laisha Silverborne and her high council or to the Sunedrion itself.

"How far is it to Landmoor?" Thealos asked as Jaerod patiently buried the fire ashes.

"We're stopping in Sol first."

"Why? We should go straight there."

"The Wolfsmen, Thealos," Jaerod reminded him. "You stirred up some trouble in Avisahn when you left. We can hide our trail better in the city. Now be patient. Don't let the importance of this rush your reason."

Near mid-afternoon, the fog finally dissipated and the colors and scents from the valley returned. Thealos could see the sprawling city of Sol in the valley lowlands, perched on a high outcropping on the right bank of the Trident river. The city itself wasn't as enormous as Dos-Aralon, but its size had always impressed him. The outer walls were easily thirty feet high, spiked with watchtowers. Small villages hunkered down along the shadows, close to the protective bastions. From his vantage in the highlands, Thealos saw the needle-like masts from scores of ships on the far side of the city. The docks of Sol. Seagulls filled the sky like hundreds of gray leaves swirling in the wind, mingling with the smoke from smithfires and chimneys. There was also a smell, one that grew stronger the closer they approached. It was the stench of sewage mingled with the salty aroma of the ocean. Even from several miles away, it bothered him.

Landmoor

click on map to view larger image

They approached a gate and joined a branch of the King's Highway just east of the main road from Dos-Aralon. As they passed beneath the spike and rail portcullis, the comforts of the Inlands vanished. Sol was a giant hulk of a city, bursting furiously inside the tight walls. Buildings rose two to three stories on each side, with narrow jagged streets barely separating them. Down the alleys he saw that the top levels of the buildings hung out over the streets, close enough that someone could reach across and open a window on the other side. A dog urinated in the sloping gutters choked with grit and debris. The stench was awful, and Thealos covered his

nose and mouth to keep from gagging.

"It's not this bad along the trading wharves," Thealos complained.

"Of course it isn't. The Shae wouldn't trade here otherwise. But you get used to the smell…eventually," the Sleepwalker said. "And the Shae sense of smell is more highly refined after all."

"It reeks worse than a slaughter pen," Thealos muttered, trying to ignore the ignominious stench. "This makes Dos-Aralon smell like mint, and I thought it was ill-kept."

"Sol has been like this for a while," Jaerod explained. "She has a great deal of laundry that hasn't been washed, so to speak." Pausing, he turned around, his black cloak whipping. "See the garrison tower over there? The symbols have almost faded, but you can still make them out. Those were part of the original watchpost. Most of the towers are gone now, but there used to be long catwalks connecting them." His fingers traced across the sky. "The Shae could pass quickly while the humans lived down here in the squalor of the streets."

"The humans lived here even then?"

Jaerod nodded with certainty. "Sol has always been a trading hub. The towers were heavily guarded from below so that the Shae would be undisturbed by what the humans did down in the streets." He shook his head regretfully. "Imagine how it made the survivors of the Sol don Orai destruction feel. The Shae were always watching them, keeping them down in the grime and mire. Armed guards prevented any contact between the races. And you wondered last night why humans never learn. The refugees from the destruction were taught by the Shae's example." He sighed. "The towers are gone now, the catwalks stripped away to make things equal. Visitors from the East Kingdoms stop here to trade with Dos-Aralon, but this is all they can see."

"Do the Bandits trade here, too?"

"Of course they do. Whether don Rion is ignorant of it or not, who can say? The Bandits have connections with the League of Ilvaren – in fact, one of their battle commanders used to be an Ilvaren pirate. If you refuse to trade with a pirate, then you get attacked on the high seas. An Ilvaren gold piece is worth the same as Aralonian crowns to the merchants and moneylenders of Sol. A Sheven-Ingen blade costs the same regardless. The garrison is well provisioned, so the Bandit Rebellion does not cause much trouble within the city itself. They don't want to end up in the River Cellars, the old Shae prisons along the wharves." He wrinkled his nose. "And you thought the gatehouse reeked…"

Thealos nodded briskly. He was anxious to get their business done and leave, but he didn't want it to show on his face. He was much more comfortable in the open plains anyway. The walls and buildings pressed in on him, and the air was thicker than he was used to breathing. He couldn't feel the presence of earth magic at all in the city. It was worse than Dos-Aralon. "Where do we go from here?"

"For now, you can wander about as you'd like. There are shops that sell new clothes," he added, giving Thealos a scrutinizing glance. Thealos had to admit it – he did have the look of a common wayfarer. "I have a visit to make before I join you again. Meet me at dusk at the Foxtale Inn, near the Sheven-Ingen docks. It is a well-kept tavern along the piers. Oh, and don't play Bones with the Drugaen there. He cheats."

"Why can't I go with you?" Thealos asked.

The Sleepwalker looked at him with a smirk. "I have my reasons. Which I doubt you would ever truly appreciate unless you became a Sleepwalker yourself. Now buy yourself some clothes and I'll meet you at the inn later. Watch for thieves. I'm trusting the son of a barter can handle him-

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be terrified."

Callie glared at him, and her eyes flashed in the morning light. "Well, if you put it that way, I will go."

Orevel protested all the way up the path to the valley of the dragon. It wasn't right, he insisted. When she got too tired or too frightened, he didn't mind if she left. She was walking too slowly. Her virgin blood might acerbate the dragon.

Callie marched beside him stoically, dragging the spear-point along in the dirt behind her, and informed him he needn't worry himself about any of that. Finally Orevel sighed.

"Look, if you're going to carry the spear, I wish you wouldn't just drag it along like that. You'll dull the edge," he said.

The young woman wrinkled her nose. "Your armor smells terrible."

"It's clean," he grumbled.

"Why, exactly, did you come to slay the dragon?"

"To protect the people of the land," he replied.

"From what?"

"The dragon," he said, slowly and carefully. "Dragons devour sheep and virgins the world over," he enunciated, suspecting her to be a bit slow, as all women were.

"Oh yes," she shot back. "I've heard all the stories. Great big flying lizards that lie around all day in caves and then suddenly decide hmm, I've got to go and get me another one of those yummy virgins like I had last week. Maybe I'll have this one with a little cranberry sauce."

Orevel suspected she was being ironic. "It's what we do," he told her. "We knights, that is. We slay dragons and vanquish evil. Three knights have never returned from slaying this dragon. It is said to be a monstrous foe."

"Does it pay well, all this slaying and vanquishing?" She raised one eyebrow.

"It doesn't pay anything," he said. "It's what we're expected to do. We volunteer, for the glory of–"

"Oh, glory," Callie said. "Why didn't you just say so?" And she laughed.

Orevel didn't really know what to say to that, so he kept quiet.

About midmorning they topped a slight rise and looked down into a wide valley. It was lushly green and had a small creek running through it at the far end, as well as a few trees. At the far end, where the mountains began, there was a dark maw in the hillside. A half-moon of bare earth surrounded it for ten feet, broken only by a small stand of boulders.

"Ah," Orevel nodded sagely. "The cave."

"Yes," said Callie. "That much is right at least. You'll want to set up watch where the others did, I suppose?"

She led him straight up to the boulders, about seven feet from the cave entrance. The light from the sun only illuminated the cave a foot or two inward–beyond that was a cool, quiet darkness. The ground around the entrance, he noted, was riddled with cast-off pieces of armor.

"You see?" he pointed.

"Those?" She snorted. "Those are just leftovers."

Orevel ignored her and quickly appraised the scene. There was a wide space in front of the cave where he could do combat with the beast, but he would have to watch his step around the cast-off armor. There were the boulders, convenient for dodging behind in case of sudden bouts of gaseous flame. There were several shields lying around as well, in case his own should be knocked out of his hands. All in all, it couldn't have been a more ideal spot for slaying a dragon.

Orevel nudged one of the shields with his toe, keeping a wary eye on the cave entrance. The crest on it was familiar.

"Ah, Sir Banderin," he said sadly. "He was a most noble fellow." He thought he heard a giggle, but when he turned, Callie was standing his spear up against a rock.

"You should go back to the village now," he told her. "Keep out of harm's way."

"Oh, no," she shook her head. "I want to watch you slay the dragon."

"Suit yourself." He settled down behind the boulders to wait.

Callie went off into the grass and began weaving daisy chains and decorating his horse with them. Orevel rolled his eyes. Slayer was known to sever the fingertips of careless grooms who brought his oats in late, but he appeared to have no aversion to being anointed with flowers.

The problem with the boulders, Orevel soon discovered, was that although they provided the perfect vantage point, they provided no cover from the sun. A few hours later he felt like the business end of a turkey dinner inside his armor, and there was now a very distinct aroma rising up around him. He considered carefully, and then removed his steel boot coverings, his helmet, and his gauntlets. He could always pull them back on at first sight of the dragon.

Callie caught sight of him and raised her eyebrow, but said nothing. She and Slayer were napping in the grass. Orevel began to review all he knew of dragons in his mind, trying his best to ignore the rivulets of sweat that were rolling down his flesh and beginning to tickle.

Dragons were stupid, he knew. Thick-headed. An agile knight would have no trouble dodging the claws and teeth. But they were well-armored, so it took the strength of the gods to get a spear into them. He hoped his god wouldn't be busy when the time came. Then there was the hacking off of the head. Every knight knew to avoid the poisonous blood that was standard issue for a dragon.

He shifted inside his armor and glared up at the sky. There wasn't a cloud to be seen, and the sun beamed down with a sort of relentless cheerfulness. Orevel considered carefully, then looked over at Callie.

"Could you, er, would you mind–" he began. She opened one eye to look at him. "It's just that I'm being boiled alive," he said. She grinned and rose to help him.

Orevel had to admit she knew a lot when it came to armor. She helped him slip out of his with very little effort.

"You won't be able to get back into it in time, if the dragon comes out," she warned.

"I've got the chain mail," he said, "and my expertise."

"Oh yes. Your expertise."

"As a knight, I mean. I haven't actually killed any dragons."

"Do tell," she murmured.

"It's a formative event in a knight's life, you know," he went on, wiping at the sweat on his forehead with the handkerchief she offered him. It had a distinctly floral aroma that was pleasing.

"So I've heard," she said.

"It's just that what with all the kingdoms at peace right now there aren't many chances for a young knight to prove himself anymore," he went on. "Most of them have retired already, and taken up trades. My uncle, you've heard of him, Sir Adrinol–?"

She shook her head.

"Well, he's offered me a place in his brewery anytime I like. He used to be one of the most celebrated knights in the land."

"Peace does that," Callie said, eyeing him a little more gently than she had before. Her eyes

were really very green in the sunlight. And there were freckles on her nose.

"Does what?"

"Takes away the need for warriors."

"For heroes, you mean."

"Oh, no. There are all sorts of ways to be a hero."

Orevel looked at her, unable to think of any that didn't involve running someone through with something sharp.

"It's just that I'm the last knight in my family," he said. "My brothers have all gone off to become accountants. And this is the last dragon. So I thought that if I'm doomed to run a brewery for the rest of my life, I'd make a go at something memorable before I hang up my shield."

"But there are still other knights out there," Callie pointed out. "Or at least little boys with dreams."

"So?"

"Well, if this is the last dragon, and you kill it, what will they ever do with themselves?"

Orevel had to think about that for a minute. "I can't go back without having killed the dragon. Everyone will think I'm a coward."

"Would they? I believe most families are happier to have a son home in one piece, rather than a hero home in pieces."

Orevel thought suddenly of his mother. She had done a lot of crying when he left, and his father had gotten something in his eye and had to turn away. He looked up at the sky. The sun was going down.

"It would be a shame to kill the very last dragon," Callie said. "Then no one would ever be able to tell another story about seeing a dark shape flying overhead, or mysterious smoke rising up from a cave. Little boys who want to become knights wouldn't have any reason to whittle wooden swords any more, if there weren't any more dragons."

Orevel could remember many an hour whittling wooden swords with his brothers, and lurking around the attic in search of monsters.

"But it's a formative event," he murmured.

"It's funny you say that." She settled down next to him. "We never had any knights in our village. Formative events for us are things like bringing in a good crop, getting married, paying off the mortgage. Growing old with the same woman you picked in the first place. But then again, I suppose we must seem very simple to you. Can I ask you a question?"

He nodded.

"If you didn't have to slay the dragon to prove yourself, what would you really want to do?"

Orevel shifted in his chain mail. "Well, honestly, I do sort of like my uncle's brewery. It's good work, and people are usually grateful for our product. And my uncle says that once I return, he wouldn't mind if I tried a special new recipe I've had in mind. Just to see how it sells, you understand. I like coming up with new recipes."

"I've always wanted to live in the city," Callie said.

They were quiet a moment. Slayer chased a butterfly for a few feet, then had a good roll.

"Do you want to know a secret?" Callie blinked at him.

Orevel found that he suddenly did. He also thought it might be interesting, in a purely scientific way, to count her freckles. He nodded.

"Banderin didn't die. He went off to open a clothing shop in Pasia. He had wonderful ideas for hats. I've heard he's doing very well and married one of his counter-girls. And Sir Sanderal,

that's his shield with the lovely tea-roses across the top, he went east to Down Derny and started a topiary business. I've heard he does work for the queen. Sir Alberus, the blue shield with the wheat sheaves over there, became a chef. I believe he and Sanderal work together on large banquets. I get cards from them on holidays."

Orevel stared at the cast-off armor. "Do you mean they were cowards and ran away from the dragon when it appeared?"

Callie laughed. "No, they just walked away. Banderin said the armor always gave him a rash, and Sanderal's shoes never fit right and gave him corns, and Alberus, well…" she smiled.

"Yes?"

"Alberus said it would be a shame to kill the very last dragon. He had a very tender heart."

Just then, in the thoughtful silence, something breathed.

Orevel scrambled to his feet and drew his sword. Callie, he noticed, merely peered around the boulder.

There are sounds that worry the nerves. There are mysterious things that go bump in the night, and make the heart pit-pat until a glass of water and much inner dialogue can convince one it was just a loose shingle or the slow settling of foundation. There are the wails of amorous cats in alleys that elicit a slight chill, the roll of incoming thunder that makes huddling under a blanket a warm and comforting place to be.

This was not one of those sounds.

This sound was the slow sibilant breath of something deeper and darker and much more frightening because it was not a loose shingle, nor a cat. It was a ponderous breath, in the interim of which it seemed wholly possible tides broke and saplings turned to trees and spores became mold. There was a heaviness of age and weight and the enormous patience of stone and weather.

Whatever it was, Orevel got the very strong feeling that not only was it waiting, it was also smelling him.

"My god," he whispered.

"Do you only have one? That seems a little pessimistic," Callie replied.

It didn't seem to Orevel that he was really breathing. Whatever was in the cave could do enough breathing for an entire city, for the next hundred years.

Some of the darkness began to lift, yawning upward like a small continent–like some entire moon–and the late-afternoon light was reflected off the deep, oceanic wetness of an eye.

A dusty claw as large as a wagon emerged. It hooked a bit of nearby armor with one of its yellow talons and dragged it across the bare earth. Then–and Orevel would not have believed it if he had not seen it–the dragon batted the piece of armor around playfully. After a moment it withdrew the claw, closed its eye, and turned in its nest as if a large portion of the earth was shrugging. Finally it disappeared into the dark again, with a mild sniff.

Orevel leaned against a boulder, his sword-tip falling limply to the ground.

"He's really an old dear." Callie tucked an errant bit of hair back under her crown of daisies. "In the summer the children bring him apples."

Then she met his eyes, and blinked once, slowly.

"Dragerzer," said Orevel.

"Did you want to go in after him? He doesn't like to come out much. I'd be glad to send your parents a letter about you, if you don't come out."

Orevel shuddered. Slow thoughts of breweries and soft living came to him. He thought of his parents, married twenty years with five sons and still seeming to like one another. He thought of his

new recipe. It involved cranberries, which he thought might add a distinctive flavor. He looked at Callie and thought about counting her freckles. All of them. Even the ones that trickled down into the lacier regions of her blouse. It might take a while. He would need time for that.

He opened his mouth.

"Why yes, I will go to the city with you, Sir Orevel." She smiled. Several freckles re-adjusted themselves to form small constellations.

"Arggumm," he said.

"Very well. We'll leave the weapons and armor behind, since you insist. Come along Percy," she called, rising.

Slayer snorted and looked up with wet, adoring eyes. He trotted over to nuzzle at her hand.

"His name's Slayer," Orevel managed.

"Oh no, he likes Percy better." Callie scratched behind one of Slayer's ears, and she and the horse started out across the valley, side-by-side. Orevel glanced back momentarily, as a short sniff from just inside the cave created a small dust devil that rattled the left-over armor with flying debris.

"Come along Orevel," Callie called.

He went.

There were many layers of heroism. Being married, perhaps, was just the bit with the icing. But Orevel felt better prepared to deal with that than with what lay in the cave. Besides, there were freckles to consider, and cranberry beer, and a mortgage on a small three-bedroom cottage with a garden and a large pasture for Slayer–er, Percy.

In the quiet of the evening, the Entimido villagers came out of the shadows around the dragon's cave to watch them go. Then they gathered up Orevel's cast-off armor, spread it around the clearing in front of the cave for the dragon to play with, left a few apples, and went away. The dragon slumbered on.

THE END

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violent emotions were unheard of in his time. He didn't know how to react to such a stare…

He realised suddenly that Kevin Blake was looking at him in horror. Burns wondered what was wrong. All he had done was…

He looked up to find Isaac Walker looking back at him. Burns met the gaze of the man who had changed the course of mankind and felt his stomach turn. They had warned them about this frequently that morning. Whatever happened, they were to remain anonymous. Time travel was still an uncertain science. No one knew how big a change could be caused by a small event, like a cough, a smile or a frown. Especially where such a man as Isaac Walker was concerned.

And now, he had done exactly what they had warned him against. The die had been cast, and he had interfered.

Swallowing hard, trying to keep the contents of his stomach where they should remain, he sat down. His mind raced. His heart beat faster and faster. Bile rose into his mouth but he forced it down. He couldn't afford to be sick, that might make the situation even worse. His palms were sweaty. He felt as if he couldn't breathe.

Calm down, Burnsy, he told himself. Just calm down. He hardly looked at you, I'm sure. It was a momentary glance, nothing more. Just hold yourself together.

He peered around the edge of the seat, trying to get another glimpse of the visionary, trying to make sure that everything was all right. Instead, he found Blake standing in the aisle, looking his way. The tall, skeletal man nodded to the exit. To Burns' surprise, the tall man had a look of fury on his face. Perhaps anger has returned in his time, Burns' thought, remembering that the man was from almost two hundred years into Burns' future. Time travel was supposedly commonplace then. Nevertheless, he was certain that Blake had received the same warnings before receiving his time dial.

Burns nodded at his partner in time, acknowledging that they should leave. His heart ached that he would be unable to complete the tour and see the publication of Walker's first oeuvre, The Man Who Walked Across the World. That had been the pivotal moment, really, the period in which Walker first came to the public eye.

But, he had made a faux pas, and he would have to suffer the consequences. Most probably, his time travelling privileges would be revoked as soon as he got home. Even as a scholar who had spent his entire life studying the life and works of Isaac Walker, he would be unable to use the time dialer again. Still, at least he had had a single glimpse of the man who had shaped the future and, indeed, the life of Joshua Burns.

The bus pulled to a halt and the twin doors opened outwards like a… like a… Like the petals of a spring flower. Those were the words. Words that Isaac Walker would probably be writing right now as he described the first interstellar journey of a G-pod. Burns smiled. I wonder what Walker would think if he knew that I travelled to Tempus in a real-life G-pod this morning?

His smile vanished the moment that the bus pulled away, however. Blake still looked at him with a mixture of horror and pure, unadulterated fury. Anger must definitely be on the rise in his time, Burns thought. I wonder why? Nevertheless, he decided that it would be best if he made amends before they returned home.

"Listen, Mr. Blake, I'm sorry to have…"

"Don't." Ernest Blake turned away.

"But…"

"Just don't. Let's just return to Tempus and get home. All right?"

"Yes… Yes, I suppose you're right. That would be best."

Burns felt awful. He had never felt such emotions emanating from a man. Blake was obviously furious. Burns wondered what kind of change in society could bring about a return to such… well, such baser emotions. It might be an interesting study for his next… No, he rejected the idea. He had to get used to the fact that he probably would never time travel again.

Ernest Blake soon vanished into nothingness. By now, he would be back in the Tempus facility on Earth, probably already experiencing the full wrath of the Time Controllers. Well, it would be unfair to let the poor man suffer alone. After all, it hadn't been his fault.

Twisting the dial located beneath his jacket sleeve, he stepped through the time door and back into the future.

The journey through time was like a journey through nothingness. His entire body lost all sense of movement, of weight, indeed of any kind of self. It was a pure void, unsullied by feelings, emotions or worries. In the time it took Burns to travel almost three hundred years into the future, as well as across the world to the European continent, he was able to shrug off the situation in the past and begin planning his defence in the future. All his worries went away and he started to think pleasurably of seeing his dear Linda again.

The time door opened and he stepped through.

Into a world totally different from the one he had left. A wilderness of barren rock and shifting sand dunes rolled away into the distance. Above, the sky was a terrible sight, all black storm-clouds and red striations. It looked like a scab that had been picked and picked until infection set in and began to eat away at the flesh. The whole scene seemed like something out of a nightmare, especially for someone who had lived his entire life in the pleasant gardens of a paradise like Eden must have been in the beginning.

"What? How?"

He turned around and around, trying to make sense of what had happened. How could this be? Where was Tempus? Where was his home?

"Where is Tempus?" He screamed that last aloud, throwing it at the sky, filling the words with all of his terror.

"This is Tempus."

Burns fell to his knees. The voice seemed to come from the skies themselves. For a single, fear-inspiring moment, he thought that he had died. He was in Hell, and this was the voice of God come to render the final judgment upon him. He fell on his face and screamed.

"Why?"

"Because, you didn't follow the rules."

This time, the voice came from just beside him. Burns looked up to find a man dressed in one of Tempus' white jumpsuits hovering a few inches above the rock-face. The man was familiar somehow, his healthy youthful face reflecting a mixture of pity and unbearable sorrow. He was staring at the wilderness, peering into the distance as if to find a glimmer of life in the barren wasteland.

Burns finally found his voice again.

"How can this be Tempus?"

The man looked down and his features hardened slightly. "This is what has happened to the Earth because of you."

"What?" The word was a whisper, picked up and carried away by a sudden gust of wind.

"You didn't follow the rules. We told you clearly that you had to have no effect on the events that were to unfold. We warned you of the consequences of such an action."

"A change in the timeline."

"Exactly. You see, my dear Mr Burns, the timeline is a fickle thing. We at Tempus have been studying it for a long time. A very long time. At one time, we believed that it was a set entity, like a river, flowing in one direction, in one flow. However, we soon realised that it was a river that has many branches, as well as a river that could carry you along many different currents, some flowing in one direction, others in another. Time is not set, Mr Burns. And its course can be changed by the smallest event."

"What have I done?"

"You interfered."

"But… But it was just a look. One moment in time. How could it change things this drastically?"

"Actually, Mr Burns, it wasn't one moment. It was one word. What power in a word, though! Your disturbance on the bus broke Mr Walker's concentration. He returned to his line of thought only to have lost the word he had had in mind, a word that typified his ideas. We don't know what the word was. Suffice to say, he was unhappy with the one he chose."

"When he got home that night, he re-read what he had written. Over and over he read it, each time stumbling over that one word. He was forever overly critical of his own work, was Mr Walker. Only the acclaim he received when The Man Who Walked Across the World was published managed to bolster his self-confidence enough to carry on writing. But, that night, pursued through the darkness by that one word, he wondered if he was good enough. The next morning, he burned the few pages of his book and went back to work at the diner where he would spend the rest of his life."

"What?" Burns couldn't believe it.

"Yes. Walker's first book was never published. He gave up and the world of Iterra was banished to a part of his mind where he seldom cared to wander. He tried to write a few times, but each time that first false start came back to haunt him. The few pages of manuscript that remained after his death where thrown onto a fire the day after he died.

"And," the Time Controller went on, "without Walker's words to fire the hearts of a new generation, the human race never dragged itself out of the hell that was the Third World War. The war went on, year after year, until, finally, one side did that."

He pointed at the sky. Burns looked up, sobbing softly as he stared at the terrible scab that should have been a scintillating blue. Instead, the red seemed even angrier and the black, swirling clouds seemed to be pressing down upon him.

"How?"

"How did they do it? They used a new type of weapon. We're not sure what it was, or how it scorched the skies. But the radiation is still there."

"Radiation? You mean…"

"Yes, Mr Burns. You are dying. I, on the other hand, am just a hologram, a mental recording implanted into your brain before you left Tempus this morning."

"You knew?" Burns shot to his feet, hands balled into fists. For the first time in his life, he felt real anger. The fury coursed through him like an acid, scouring his inner parts and rendering him senseless with pure energy. "How could you let me do this? How could you let me destroy my world?"

"But, Mr Burns, you haven't. Or, in another sense, you have. You have only destroyed your world. Don't you understand? I told you, time is a river with many branches. This is one."

Burns still looked confused, so the Time Controller went on, his soft tones attempting to be

soothing. "Mr Burns, what do you know of the Grandfather Paradox?"

Burns frowned, his brow furrowing. "It was a flawed belief in the twentieth century. It said that time travel was impossible, because if you went backwards in time and killed your grandfather, you would then never be born. So, you could not go backwards in time and kill your grandfather. But that belief was done away with a long time ago when people realised that rather than a universe, there was a multiverse…" Burns trailed off, his eyes lit up with understanding.

"Yes, Mr Burns, exactly. A multiverse. A river with many branches. You see, we discovered very early on that, when someone effected the past, he could no longer return to his own time. He was trapped, locked into the timeline of his own creation. His own world, as it were. The rest of us went on in our own happy lives, in our own happy little timeline, oblivious. We don't understand why; maybe it is the multiverse's way of keeping balance. But, it has happened before, and it is the reason that we have such strict protocols."

"But… But if that is true, why isn't Blake here with me?"

"Think about it, Mr Burns. Blake did not break the rules. He had no effect on the timeline. So the multiverse, for want of a better word, allowed him to return to his own timeline. By now he is being debriefed, and he will be returned home."

Burns began to weep. Suddenly, it all made sense. He had broken the rules. He must pay the price. Not by being denied time travel privileges, but being denied his old life, his old friends, his wife. He was trapped here in a world that should never have been, a world created by his own stupidity and his own greed to catch a glimpse of the man who had shaped the course of his life. Because of him, Isaac Walker had not had the brilliant career he should have had. He never won the Nobel Prize, he never shaped the human race into the image of what he had dreamt of. And billions of humans, the whole human race in fact, had died because of that. Never mind that they lived on somewhere else, never mind that his Linda was still alive in an alternate reality. Those billions of lives, the life of his Linda, were on his head, here, in this reality. They had died because of him.

"My God," he whispered. "What power in a word."

THE END

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thank heaven. But something bothered me about the plant. It was dying. Perhaps it needed sunlight. Not possible, even if the room I worked in did have a window. The winter haze outside was relentless, but I heard on the radio there was sunshine up in the mountains.

Just before lunch break, I had an asthma attack. Worse than usual. The mountains were sounding quite good all of a sudden.

It took me an hour to find my boss. When she turned up in her office looking harried, I asked her if I could take the afternoon off.

She looked at me. You know, really looked at me.

"Tomorrow then," I said. "Can I have tomorrow off? A sick day. My asthma is getting bad."

"No," she said and sat down, shuffling the papers on her desk.

"Saturday?" I ventured. "We're supposed to get Saturdays off."

"Jamie," she said looking at me again. "You know we have a deadline. You knew when you took this job there would be deadlines."

"But…"

"Look. This company takes care of you. It pays a fair wage and expects fair work in return. If you can't handle that, let me know and I'll replace you."

I retreated to my cubicle. Was the amaryllis trembling? I know I was. I reached for a tissue to dry my eyes and noticed again the snow angels in the dust on that ancient book. I hadn't touched it since I gave up dreams of freelancing four years ago and got a "real job."

Without moving, I glanced from the tiny winged imprints on the *Writer's Market* to the overflowing stack of papers on my desk. Then I reached for my bag, threw open the leather flap and dug out the stacks of work I had taken home with me. The sweet smell of the sagging amaryllis strengthened my nerve.

I planted the pile of work on my already overflowing desk and placed the *Writer's Market* in the bag next to my laptop. Then I picked up the amaryllis and headed for the door.

The nature screen saver still played on my monitor while I drove out of the city and up where the sunshine broke over the haze.

It took me hours of driving to find Grandma Herschel's old cabin. Sure enough, the outhouse still squatted next to the south side, just as my father said it always had. The spiky scent of burning pine logs greeted me when I got out of the car.

Maneuvering the amaryllis out of the back seat and shouldering my bag, I made my way past snow piled over my head and up the steps to the door of the cabin. When I reached out to knock, the unlocked door swung inward.

The cabin was small, but open. A nearly threadbare couch and chair sat facing a wood-burning stove, which marked the beginning of a small kitchen. On the other side of the room, a narrow staircase led up to the loft where, I imagined, there was a bedroom.

Against the far wall, not too close to the stove, four lovely amaryllises stood in full bloom, and a bent old lady, with wild wisps of white hair, stood talking to them.

"Stop that Papilio," she said. "Picotee, Rilona stop that now. You'll tear the petals."

Did I hear someone laughing at her? Voices like tinkling chimes? Yes, there must be a wind chime outside the window.

I stepped into the cabin and pushed the door closed behind me with my foot. The thud of wood against wood made the old woman jump and spin around.

"Oh, Jamie," she said, brightening on seeing me. "You came. I so hoped you would. I left the door open for you. Won't you come in?"

She took my drooping white amaryllis and placed it with the other colorful flowers and went out back to get more wood for the stove. I followed and noticed her weak old hands shaking as she bent to pick up the wood.

"Here, let me do that," I said. She didn't argue, just kept saying how glad she was that I had come, while I carried the wood in and stoked the fire.

"Grandma," I said when I was done, "can I stay with you for a while? I just quit my job and…"

"Of course you'll stay, dear," she said, patting my hand. "You know, I'm getting too old to keep things up around here, and someone has to do it after all. Who would take care of them when I'm gone, if not you?"

"Take care of who?" I asked.

"Why, the fairies, of course."

"Fairies?" I glanced around the cabin as a finger of cold tickled the back of my spine. I shivered.

Grandma Herschel nodded and pointed to the amaryllises blooming beneath the window. "They've been in the family for generations. Someone must care for them and protect them. I am old, and the world has changed so much."

The chimes tinkled again, and the flowers rustled, but I only saw the amaryllises. "Grandma," I said, taking her frail hand and leading her over to the couch, "I'd love to stay and help out around here, but you and I both know fairies are only make-believe."

She pulled her hand away from me and pointed her knobby finger at the flowers. "Of course they're real. Look, look right there. There's Picotee dressed in white and red. Next to her, you see Papilio in mauve, Rilona in salmon, and Susan in the rosy pink. They are fairies. They are real, and it's our family's duty to look after them."

The wind whistled outside tinkling the chimes and wafting through the window to rustle the amaryllises. My own white amaryllis remained closed.

"Okay, Grandma," I said. I realized I wasn't going to change her mind. No wonder the family avoided this place. But me, well, I could live with invisible fairies and do the chores for Grandma if it gave me a quiet place to write and fresh air to breathe.

Grandma glanced from me to the flowers and back. She sighed, letting the air blow between her wrinkled lips, and then withering onto the couch like a summer flower frozen by winter ice. "You don't see them, do you?" she said.

"No, Grandma, I don't." I had to be honest. "All I see are your beautiful flowers, but if you show me how to care for them, I will."

Wiping a tear from her eye with one hand, she squeezed my arm with the other hand. "Yes, Jamie, I'll teach you everything you need to know. You'll see. You'll see."

The chimes rippled. My own snow-white amaryllis opened, and the petals fluttered as if something had just taken flight from the center of the flower. If I stay here, I thought, I'll soon be as crazy as Grandma Herschel. I stared at the amaryllises and decided that might not be such a bad thing.

THE END

Continued from page 24

super cloud. The shock wave ring spewed lightning in an unraveling discharge that made a piker of solar prominences. Palmer wondered. Could the shock of whatever that thing was have spawned the quake that took Evanna? No. It would have been much worse than that.

A carriage roared overhead, speeding toward the landing field. Palmer wondered about Cosgrove and then headed for his own carriage resting near the parkway.

He remembered descriptions of this type of Hypermotility. First the sun would leap across the sky. It was as though it had slipped from its fixed place in the heavens, lurching ahead hours in seconds. Weather would go berserk. Through it all there would be sporadic quakes, increasing in frequency and strength until eventually the whole planet would shake apart, blowing its atmosphere into space moments before the end. After that the sun would crumble. That was the best way to describe it. There would be no nova here, only dissolution. The briefest recorded span of time from the lurching of the sun to the shattering of the world was three and a half hours; the longest, two days. All they could really count on was three hours unless, he thought coldly, Ahrgol set a new record for brevity.

A gust of wind nearly lifted him off the ground. He opened the carriage, jumped in and yelled at it to fire up. The door shut and the howling wind dropped to a near whisper. It gave Palmer a measure of security, though he knew it to be false.

"Destination?" the ship asked him calmly.

"Base headquarters, science complex--priority one."

"Priority one," the ship replied, and the engines rose to a fever pitch. Palmer braced himself as the craft fired into the air at a seventy degree climb. A few seconds later it leveled off, banking to the south.

The control bunkers at the base were five minutes away at priority speed. Palmer could barely see the massive landing fields through the turbulence. Gyros whined and vibrated to keep the craft stable in the violent air. He leaned forward to look east. Clouds frothed among blacks and

Ahrgol in HyperM - click image for a larger view

Thanks to the USGS for source material used in the creation of this Procyx illustration.

oranges, stacking high and anviling grotesquely at their summits. Sheet lightning flashed in a rapid stream. The probing trails of forked lightning gouged the terrain like a Tesla coil in overdrive. Above the roar of the engines, Palmer heard and felt the rumblings of thunder spilling from the maelstrom.

He glanced south again. The landing field extended beneath him. Searching, he felt a thrill of relief. A single ferryship now moored near one of the docks. So, the vessel had landed safely despite whatever trouble had plagued its approach. Loading vans and shuttles converged upon on the ship. Palmer was too high to see any actual people. He tried to spot damage to the starship, but it looked whole: the nose was a sleek spoon whose covered brim held a mirrored bubble. The spoon's 'handle' stretched back into a streamlined, rectangular section. Long cylinders extended nose-ward atop the upper corners of this aft section. A central fin radiated just above the engine ports at the rear.

Palmer's heart-shaped carriage descended in a spiral that would land him near the pyramid-shaped science complex. If his suspicions were correct, a certain Dr. Mael Varl would still be inside, happily running tests while everything fell apart around him.

The carriage eased toward the entrance of the science complex. The nose lifted as it slowed and neared the ground--touchdown. Wind howled in Palmer's ears as the door swung open. He jumped out and ran to the building. Gusts throttled madly, thrashing dust at his eyes. He reached the entrance. The door flicked open and Palmer was inside.

"Dr. Varl," he called, "are you in here?"

A muddled answer croaked from some distance away down the long, spiraling corridor. It echoed oddly back on itself from the hall's curvature. The voice sounded as though it had not been used for days.

"Where are you?" Palmer shouted. He jogged in what he thought was the right direction, but there was no reply. The tubular passageway was bathed in the reds of emergency lighting. He reached the opened entrance to a room. Here? Equipment and supplies cluttered in disarray from the quake, but no Dr. Varl. Palmer moved on, calling again. This time the answering voice was far softer. Palmer cursed under his breath, turned and ran in the opposite direction.

"Dr. Varl?" Palmer approached the lab.

"What!" The answer drenched anger. Palmer ran inside. Crouching intently over a temporal scanner, his face unshaven like Palmer's and thin as a stick, was Dr. Varl. His gaze burned caustic at being interrupted until he recognized Palmer. "Oh, hello Martin."

Varl turned back to the scanner, tweaking an instrument at its smoldering insides. He looked haggard. A trickle of blood ran down his ear from his hairline.

"Are you all right?"

"Hmm . . . what?" he wiped the blood away absently, rubbing it on the sleeve of his tunic. He didn't even see it.

"You're bleeding," Palmer came close. The man reeked. Obviously he had not bathed in days.

"What? Oh." He tested it with his fingertips. "It's just a scratch."

"Let me see. Come on."

"I'm fine."

"Right. Come on. We've got to go."

"Just a few minutes."

"Grief, man! Don't you know we're in phase one of Hypermotility? We've only got a few hours. Let's get to the ferryship."

"HyperM." Varl answered absently, "It's not that bad yet."

"We just lost Evanna Davis in the quake a few minutes ago. Don't tell me it isn't serious."

Varl looked up, his face genuinely attentive for the first time. "Evanna? Oh no. What . . . how?"

"A support beam crushed her. Death was probably instantaneous. But I can't understand how it happened. That building was rated for eight plus on the Richter. I don't know how it could have happened."

"Hot spots, Martin. That's just what I've been trying to measure. Looks like we've got temporal distortions going on. Time is compressing in certain areas. That makes for tremendous stresses on the continuum. Other areas, even meters away, are virtually unaffected. Hot spots."

Palmer nodded, thinking back on the ruins of the Stonehenge buildings. Some were razed while others around it remained untouched.

"Any way of predicting these hotspots?"

Varl shrugged. "Maybe. I'll need to take more measurements."

"Well, not now. We'd best evacuate. The worst may strike here next. You have your things ready?"

"Of course. I sent them to receiving a couple of days ago. Martin, I have to stay a little longer. I just barely got this unit calibrated again. I can do a planet-wide scan using the comm satellites. Amazingly, they're still intact. They must have clung to the planet when it skipped its rotation, but I don't understand how they could! It's . . ."

"Mael, I'm responsible for you. We've got to go."

"But I can discover so much. If I gather enough data from this next scan, I might even be able to set up a model that will be effective for predicting total planetary collapse down to the minute. That would be invaluable, wouldn't it--for other worlds . . ."

"How long?"

Varl looked down at the scanner, then back at Palmer. "Half an hour."

"All right, but I'm sending men in half an hour with orders to take you to the ship whether you're ready to go or not."

"Fine. Agreed," Varl said, turning back to the scanner.

"Anyone else here in the complex?"

"No one else in the building. Krolich's team's over at eyes and ears. Him and four others."

"Thanks," Palmer started out, then hesitated, looking back at Varl. The aging scientist, apparently thinking himself alone, sat motionless ignoring the scanner. He buried his face in his hands. Silently, Palmer left.

As Palmer emerged from the building, the winds slammed hard. He coughed against the dust that stung his face and squinted through the pall, trying to get his bearings. Where was it? He searched for the mirror-finish bubble of the observatory. Was it right or left from where he stood? Right, Palmer remembered. He started off.

The quake hit so quickly that before he knew what was going on, Palmer found himself flat on his chest and sputtering a grimy combination of dust and spit. He rode the quake as best he could, just noticing the buckling screech of steel and silicrete from the observatory ahead. The eyes and ears, as Varl had called it, shifted and buckled like a dried leaf. Miraculously, the structure as a whole remained intact. Silently, Palmer thanked science for silicrete. It had held together where ordinary, polarized concrete would have crumbled to ruin.

The quake ended. Palmer glanced at the sky as he took to his feet. Heavy storm clouds now reached toward zenith. The edges of the monster storm spread outward like white ink in water. Lightning flashed rapid strobes across the face of the city to the north and east. Near the mountains,

the bottoms of the clouds were flat and dirty. Ominous, under-slung bulges roiled into nightmare caricatures of funnel clouds.

Palmer's fears for Cosgrove and the Ahrgolians hit full force. Nothing could fly through that, and the Ahrgolian village lay beyond the mountains to the east. It was still too early for them to have picked up the villagers and returned. Palmer knew that. But by the time they should return, the terrible center of the storm complex would probably be directly over the base. The ferryship would have to lift before then. Cosgrove's only hope would be to circumvent the storm and meet them southward, providing, of course, the storm was as localized as it appeared. What if it weren't? Palmer tranzed the ferryship. There was a lot of static.

"Put a tracer on Cogs' shuttle's beacon." Palmer yelled in his mind. It was an odd habit people had in tranzing. They thought in decibels the way they would communicate in sound. Remembering that, Palmer lowered his tone. "Keep his position current and plot an updating intercept course so that we can reach him the instant we lift."

There was a reply from the ferryship, but static made it unintelligible. Palmer cursed, running on to the observatory. He had to force the door manually.

Men and women huddled around the floor near the base of the Sutherland-Zeiss megascope. Morph restraints and grav hoists grappled one edge of the main tube that hung end-upward. Having been carefully lifted from its mount, the rare instrument had apparently slipped off its center of balance and fallen. Staff clustered about it. One young technician, barely out of his teens, swung around to look at Palmer. His face, drained of color and contorted by revulsion, could not make itself frame any words.

"Dr. Krolich?" Palmer called around.

No one moved.

"Where's Dr. Krolich?"

Still no one moved or spoke.

Palmer walked forward, a sick feeling twisting his insides. The young technician backed away, affording a view that confirmed Palmer's fears. There on the floor, caught brutally under the fallen end of the megascope, was Dr. Krolich. His body, caved in under the tremendous weight, lay motionless. Unbidden, Palmer's mind saw Evanna. All the sickness of her death swept up inside him to combine with this fresh horror. The scientist's face was pale and gray. A grimace was froze his expression.

"We were dismantling the Sutherland-Zeiss when the quake hit," an older, heavily built technician said quietly. "It happened so fast--Dr. Krolich was right underneath the thing, locking the referencers. You can only get to them when the thing's dismantled."

Palmer scanned the team. All were still too stunned to think clearly.

"The grav hoist must have polarized." The technician continued. "It just shut off. Yeah, that must have been it. They ought to build a back up . . ."

"Come on," Palmer said softly. "I'm afraid we'll have to leave him."

They all stared at him incredulously.

"We can't," the youngest technician said. "We've got to take him to the ship for burial at space."

"I'm sorry. There isn't time. I'm responsible for your safety. Gather your records and report to the ferryship. I'll send a carriage over to pick you up. You have fifteen minutes."

No one moved.

"Did you hear me? We have to get off this planet."

"We've got to take him with us, Colonel." There was blind determination in the technician's eyes.

"I can appreciate your shock and your respect for Dr. Krolich, but there's nothing to do for him now. When the world goes, his remains will be just as lost as if we buried him at space. Be reasonable. Once we're safely away we can hold a memorial service . . ."

"No." The youngster was emphatic. "I'm not leaving unless we take Dr. Krolich with us." Palmer glanced at the others. None of them was so obviously adamant, but their resolve was clear. These were not military people. Palmer could not order them, as he had Hill. Then he had an idea.

"All right. But it will have to be done in a hurry. There are no absolutes in Hypermotility. Don't try to save the megascope. The thing may fall again if you try to raise it out, so stand clear. Lift it just enough to retrieve the body. I'll give you half an hour. THIRTY MINUTES! I'm sending soldiers to bring Dr. Varl then, and you must go with them--Dr. Krolich or no Dr. Krolich. I'm not about to lose you too.

They hesitated, mesmerized by Krolich's, still body.

"Go!" Palmer barked and they jumped into action.

He left them then, heading out into the gales. The carriage had moved close to the building, following his biotranz.

As he climbed into the ship, he punched up its tranz amplifier and called the ferryship.

"Is Hill there?" he asked.

"What is it Colonel?" Hill tranzed back.

"How's the loading going?"

"Ahead of schedule."

"Any word from Cogs?"

"Don't know. I'm Sorry, Colonel. I haven't been paying attention to comm. I've been outside supervising."

"Okay. I'm coming in."

"Aye, sir. I'll open the bay for your carriage."

"I may be a bit delayed"

"Sir?"

In his mind's eye, Palmer clearly saw Evanna's body again. Unbidden, the terrible events of the beam falling and Evanna's startled cry played over in his mind. Again it came to him, and again.

"Well, I thought I'd go back for Evanna Davis," he tranzed.

"Yes sir," Hill tranzed after a second. "Thanks, Colonel."

"Palmer out," He tranzed back, then spoke to the carriage. "Take me to the library." The ship lifted and shuddered in a wobbling, wind-wild path toward the heart of a city doomed to destruction.

He thought ahead to how he might lever the beam aside by himself.

This wasn't reasonable. He knew it. It flew in the face of procedure. He knew that, too. It also wasn't hard to rationalize away--not hard at all.

CHAPTER THREE
Ruin

"Who authorized powering down the P-Q-I?" Palmer was flushed with anger, but his voice carried an almost unnatural freedom from expression. The air was taut with nervous silence. "Well?" he stared unwaveringly at the pilot of the ferryship.

"I had to, Colonel. We lost trim on our EQ generator. It went out just before you tranzed us about Ahrgol going into HyperM. Everything went nuts. I just barely got her down. She can't possibly fly with this kind of trouble, and the only way to get the EQ back into adjustment is to power down the P-Q-I . . . Sir."

Palmer struggled to remain in control. He rubbed the back of his neck and took a deep breath, forcing himself to relax a little. "Weren't you aware that this whole system is on stand-by alert two? All shields are to be on double grid."

The pilot, a Captain Jenson, nodded gravely. He looked terribly haggard.

"Grief, man," Palmer said softly. "Why weren't the shields on double grid?"

"Begging your pardon," the pilot said, barely controlling his voice, "but this ship's been running solidly for seven months. We haven't been serviced for twice that long. We were on our way to a major overhaul when Fed Comm sidetracked us here. Sir--the shields were at double grid. The fool things just failed. It's amazing they haven't gone before now--sir."

Palmer forced himself to be calm. There was no sense arguing over equipment failure. He looked around the briefing room, then back at Jenson.

"How long before we can fire up?"

"It'll take two hours to balance them once we can begin. I've got double crews setting the trims right now. They've been at it since we touched down. I've got another crew looking for the crack that led to the failure in the secondary shield grids. They haven't found anything yet, but of course, that could change at any time."

"How bad *is* the EQ shift? Can't we at least fly in the atmosphere with it out?"

"Absolutely not, sir. The starboard-aft section shifted 180 degrees, critically injuring three crew." Jenson struggled visibly to remain calm. "And one dead, sir."

Palmer waited quietly. Jenson went on.

"They were thrown against the ceiling, then back to the floor two or three times before the glitch settled. Besides, engineering is *in* starboard aft. It *has* to be stable, Colonel. I don't dare take her up otherwise."

"How are your injured people?"

"Doing well, I'm told--two techs and an astrosociologist. FedComm sent her along in case you needed help convincing any natives to leave. All three are under regenerative radiation. I don't think any of them is critical anymore."

"Good." Palmer's mind flicked back to Evanna. The image of her crushed beneath the beam etched his memory again in stark vividness. He should have guessed it would. He closed his eyes in a vain attempt to banish it. He could only force the picture into the background. He opened his eyes.

"Can't you give me any idea when we might fire up the P-Q-I? Conditions outside are deteriorating. We may still be in Phase One, but we don't really know when this planet will go."

The pilot nodded, "I know that, sir. I helped evacuate Shiva when it went. Some of the other

ships didn't make it away, and we were easily within the Phase Two time window." He laughed humorlessly. "I guess there's a new minimum now."

"So when?"

"When can we fire up?" The pilot shrugged. "If you want a figure to go by . . . an hour, maybe two. It's still a shot in the dark. I just have no way of knowing, Colonel. It might be sooner than that, but I wouldn't hold your breath."

"Would more people speed things up?"

"No, sir. A hundred specialists couldn't move us along any faster. I'm afraid I don't see any short cuts."

Palmer nodded. "Fire it up as soon as you get a usable trim. I don't care about factory specs."

"Yes, sir," Jenson replied. He took a quick glance around then headed out of the briefing room toward the control bubble. Palmer watched him leave. He took a deep breath in a vain attempt to relax, then rose and walked to the wide view screen at the head of the room. He paused at the screen's control board for a moment and then played the keyboard. The screen glowed to a rich ultramarine before displaying the image he had called up.

"Good," Palmer said to himself. "We've still got orbital view of the weather." The satellite showed that the monster storm to the east was still localized around the mountains. Further east there were heavy, rapidly moving cloud systems but nothing cyclonic, and that was hopeful. If Cosgrove's shuttle could fly around the storms, they should still be able to reach the base safely--*if* they left now--or soon.

Suddenly the image flickered, then went dark.

"Great!" Palmer tried to call it up again. All that appeared was a computer message stating that the satellite had suddenly shut down. He tried to discover specifics, but the computer didn't know. He selected the satellite view of the shock wave ring to the west. The ring burned as before. Shouldn't it have spent? Palmer squinted at it. The monster cloud had spread out into a long sheet that was drifting south. A smaller, central cloud looked like a whirlpool. "What under heaven is that?" He selected a closer look. A flickering point of blue brilliance sparkled beneath the murk at the center of the muddy vortex. Where had he seen that blue? Blue. Coherent, blue light. Procyx. Procyx? A link? He quickly tranzed the load officer.

"Is Dr. Varl in?"

"Not yet Colonel. The team you sent after him hasn't come back yet."

"Let me know when he arrives."

"Aye, Colonel."

Palmer stubbed record on the image. He only got a few seconds before the screen went dark. He cursed. Satellites were beginning to go down. At least he had a few seconds of image. If only he could have run a full electromagnetic scan. But would it have shown anything? If he was seeing something akin to Procyx here then there could *be* no spectral findings. Frustrated, he returned the screen to its view of outside and the storms that plagued the city to the east.

Palmer reviewed all that had happened in the last hour--his thoughts, feelings and impressions. Foremost among them was the horrible specter of Evanna's death. After weathering this, He turned his thoughts back to his meeting with Gaultor. The Mhyrnian nobleman had shown remarkable honesty, even humility. It was not easy to take advice (especially from an enemy) that ran contrary to basic beliefs. Palmer respected Gaultor for that. Whatever happened, whether the Ahrgolians decided to leave or not, Gaultor's behavior went beyond what Palmer had imagined possible in one so justifiably indignant. He wondered if the astrosociologist that FedComm had sent

might have used a similar approach with Gaultor. He cleared the view screen and headed into the corridor.

The buzzing, rumbling hum of the P-Q-I engines began to pervade the ferryship. A thrill of relief shot through him. Somehow, against the odds, the service crew must have found the break in the second grid, repaired it, and finished calibrating the EQ generator.

The main corridor stretched from the command bubble through the full length of the ferryship back to engineering. Crew hustled past Palmer forward and aft, all looking as haggard and tired as he was.

The throbbing hum of the P-Q-I comforted him. He marveled that the EQ generator had failed. It was almost unheard of, but then this vessel *was* long overdue for maintenance. That inescapable neglect had probably caused the failure, unless the advent of Hypermotility had somehow made it happen.

Was that a possibility? According to Jenson's account, the generator had gone out just before the star system had gone into Hypermotility.

Then a new thought struck him. Could it be that Hypermotility might push a detuned EQ generator into failure just before it showed itself? If so, might this develop into a way of predicting HyperM? The possibility momentarily distracted Palmer. It was another idea he would have to discuss with Dr. Varl.

P-Q-I had been used, virtually unchanged, for centuries. It had been devised after the first days of the neo-interstellar colonizations. Back then, the old sleeper ships had been all there was. The sleepers crossed the stars at fractions of the speed of light. Palmer pondered momentarily on the scores of sleepers that had vanished without a trace. Even the records of sleeper destinations had been lost in those bizarre, confusing days of the Interregnum. That had been the last Dark Age before the Seventh Federation had been founded and practical star travel had resumed.

There was substantial evidence that some form of propulsion similar to P-Q-I existed long before the Interregnum. That was back in the Dawn Era, a time of legends about demons, magic and monsters created by horrible genetic wars--wars that had ruined the countless worlds supposedly constituting the earlier Federations.

The most powerful tyranny of the Dawn Era had been the Third Empire. Its oldest stories told of the portals: perpetually open wormholes in the space-time continuum. The portals facilitated the instantaneous and continual transmission of matter across interstellar gulfs.

Hundreds of thousands of worlds were said to have fallen to the Third Empire. Nothing could match the tactical and strategic advantages afforded the fleets and armies that commanded the portals. The legends said that after a world was conquered, all other forms of interstellar travel were destroyed, thus isolating that planet from all contact except through Imperial portals. It had seemed the Third Empire might stand forever.

Then, at the very height of the Third Empire's influence, the Vanguard starships had appeared. They were said to be warships of incomprehensible power and virtually invincible, for only a handful succeeded in utterly subduing the most irresistible empire humanity had ever seen.

After the fall of the Third Empire, the portals had been deemed so dangerous that they, in turn, were destroyed.

The Sixth Federation grew from the ashes of that empire. It stood for millennia. But then something happened. Here, even the stories were vague. The Vanguards had disappeared as mysteriously as they had come, and the Sixth Federation had dissolved within decades into the Interregnum when only the sleeper ships plied the stars. The invention of P-Q-I had come with the

renaissance. No propulsion system since had worked better. Unless, of course, the Vanguards still flew the stars somewhere.

The Vanguards. Were they real or legendary? Palmer suspected the latter. The Vanguards were supposed to be able to cross the galaxy in days, directed by beings of sublime wisdom.

Right. Legends. Yes. Wishful thinking.

But if they did exist, and it was true that they could cross the galaxy in days, then the Vanguards must utilize a drive that far superseded P-Q-I. If so, why wasn't that super-drive available to humanity in general, particularly now when the need was so great? The reasons might be political, military, or merely scientific--if there really were Vanguards.

Palmer knew of a super-secret, Vanguard-like propulsion system called *White Drive*. He had no idea what the name meant or stood for, but he knew that unmanned probes had been launched into intergalactic space, sent to study the *beginning* of the universe. Their mission included exploring not only remote galaxies, but beyond to where quasars, spiritars and astralaxies were as common as stars. What those probes might find, one could only guess. It was said they would not return for thousands of years. P-Q-I couldn't move them that fast. Perhaps these probes utilized this secret *White Drive*. Palmer smirked with irony. It was conceivable that they might return with the answer to Hypermotility. By then, of course, the Galaxy would be gone. Long gone. Although no one discussed it publicly, Palmer had studied reports that put the projected survival of the Galaxy at no more than a century.

That was incomprehensible. Palmer staggered at the notion of more than 350 billion stars destroyed in several centuries time. It was too enormous to comprehend. Of course, there were other galaxies to which some of humanity might escape, but for all anyone knew, the destruction that was occurring here might also be tearing other galaxies apart at the same moment. Perhaps all the galaxies in the universe had their own Procyx. Maybe all the other galaxies were already gone and this was the last. *Nope. Mustn't dwell on that idea.* Palmer shook himself free of the thought. Worry first about getting everyone he could off this death world. Face future horrors in the future.

Palmer strode up the sloping ramp that led to the command bubble. It measured twenty meters across. The lower three meters of its curving walls were actually wide, sweeping view screens, alive with colors, graphs and constantly updating information on all aspects of the ferryship's condition. Above the screens, the walls were so perfectly transparent that it appeared open to the outside. Only the spattering rivulets of rain trailing down the curved surface confirmed that the command center was actually an enclosed bubble. The transparency was an illusion. The dome material could filter out some or all frequencies of the electromagnetic spectrum. From without, the bubble looked completely opaque. From within, only visible light was allowed to pass through.

The floor level was crowded with instrument consoles and control desks. They were laid out in a ring. Busy crew sat inside, facing out toward the screens.

Three chairs occupied the bubble's exact center. They were configured in a triangle. Jenson occupied the forward swivel. He sat alert, scanning the screens. He mumbled something to a crew woman in the ring who nodded and turned back to her station. Palmer walked through one of the three breaks in the ring and took the starboard swivel next to Jenson.

"Congratulations on getting the P-Q-I started. Anything I can do to help?"

Palmer waited for some response from Jenson. The pilot of the Ferryship looked at him without seeing him. Palmer smiled, "Captain Jenson, is there anything I can do to help . . ." He paused, then squinted. " . . . Anything? Like get off the bridge and let you run your ship?"

"Umm?" Jenson glanced away at one of the screens for a moment, studied it dry then looked

back at Palmer. "Oh, sorry, Colonel. What did you say?"

Palmer smiled again. "I said good work on getting the P-Q-I going so quickly. Anything I can do to help?"

"Thanks, Colonel. I've got a good engineering staff. I don't know if you could . . . See, I'm running three checklists simultaneously. That's prohib under normal circumstances, but it'll buy us ten minutes." He glanced at one of the screens. "No, Carrie, that's not going to do. Kick it up ten percent. That should bring it in line."

"Good work," Palmer said, and kept quiet. Jenson turned quickly away from him, apparently grateful for the freedom Palmer's silence afforded him.

Palmer scanned the room, located the comm officer and went over to him. The crewman stubbed the ship's emergency signal while watching it cycle across the full spectrum of megatronic frequencies. He paused, shook his head, then punched the same message through into hyperspace. Palmer waited for a lull to speak.

"Any luck?" he asked.

The comm officer shook his head. "No, sir. HyperM jams everything, and I mean everything. I can't even punch through with sub-carrier shielded megatronics.

"Nothing from hyperspace?"

"If this were any normal planetary death, we'd easily punch through it with a twist line. Hypermotility clogs everything--best white noise generator I've ever seen. *Nothing* behaves normally."

"What about sensors?"

"Hmm?" The comm officer stopped to look at him.

"Are sensors working?"

"Yes, but I don't see . . ."

"Use them as a carrier--send a message over them. Somebody got the idea a few worlds ago and FedComm listens over sensor frequencies all the time now. Didn't they tell you?"

"We haven't been to dry dock for . . . It's a great idea. I'll give it a shot."

"Great. Now any chance of reaching a shuttle inside the atmosphere? I've got one on an evac sortie."

"I know about them, sir. I've got Carter listening for them, and he hasn't said a word. I must assume he hasn't been able to reach them either."

"Let me know the moment you establish contact--with anyone."

The comm officer nodded and turned back to his board.

Palmer returned to the starboard swivel next to Jenson. He pivoted around to face the control board placed specifically for his seat. The panel glided forward and locked into position in front of him. Palmer scanned it briefly for the biotranz bridge directory. He added his personal code, then called up a computer analysis of the weather.

One of the screens shifted to a northern view. Nothing could be seen of the city. The murk of muddy rain and sleet all but hid the landing terminal just 300 meters away. Only lightning flashes hinted that anything at all remained beyond the sludgy gales.

The ferryship shuddered. Indicators flashed amber. Jenson threw in graviton stabilizers, pinning the ship to the surface. Apparently, the wind had almost picked up the Ferryship and thrown it.

Palmer turned back to the screen and called up an enhancement. The ship's computers artificially cleared the mire. *Stonehenge* was a mere heap. Once majestic towers teetered near ruin.

Multiple black funnels wove in nightmarish fluidity across the city--tornadoes. Grids and animated graphs superimposed over the scene. Palmer read the numbers along side the largest of the tornadoes: *wind speed: 1,384 kilometers per hour*. He marveled, trying to imagine what it would be like inside a supersonic cyclone.

"Must be like Hell out there," Jenson said. Palmer nodded and queried an analysis and forecast.

The storm cluster was stalled above the city. That was good news, but a major quake might dislodge it and the blend of storm and ash had one direction it was sure to take: toward them. Relative calm lay south and west with the most favorable route of escape to the south. The Ahrgolian village lay southeast of the city. With the satellites gone, the ship could extrapolate only what it could sense directly. Anything beyond a few hundred kilometers began to disappear far enough behind the planet's curvature to become unreliable. It was near blind guesswork.

"Great. Just great."

"And if anything disrupts it," Palmer said, "It'll be right on top of us."

"We'll just have to be out of here by then. This ship can hold up to a lot--but supersonic weather? No, sir. I'm not about to throw us into that mess."

"Just get us out of here *with the shuttle* before the planet goes up," Palmer stood and headed for the entrance.

"You don't ask for much," he heard Jenson say. They looked at each other across the room and smiled. Palmer turned away again and went down the ramp towards the cargo hold. He stepped through the airlock that led to the cargo bay and clamped his hands over his ears against the roar.

The hold was large enough to house two shuttles and several kilotons of cargo. One of the cradles was partially filled with stacked carriages. Palmer had left his own outside. It was probably gone by now, blown against a building somewhere. The other cradle was being readied to receive Cosgrove's vessel when it returned. Shock-crates were over-stacked everywhere else, and both ship and ground crews were still frantically loading.

"How much more?" Palmer tranzed. He always had to remember not to shout a tranz in an environment like this. The noise from the tera-watt P-Q-I feeders rivaled that the gale. The chief loading officer looked around, trying to locate Palmer, found him, then tranzed his answer.

"Just two more loads, Colonel."

"Excellent," Palmer tranzed again. "Has Dr. Krolich's staff come aboard yet?"

The officer shrugged, then turned to one of the loading supervisors. Palmer couldn't hear their tranzed dialogue since he was tuned only to command frequencies. At last the chief officer turned back and nodded *yes*. Palmer gave him a "thumbs up" and left the hold. He disengaged his biotranz from the intercom.

"Martin," a gravelly voice came down the corridor at him, "I've got something to show you."

Dr. Varl jogged toward him, his arms loaded with data cubes and rolls of hard charts. His pockets gushed perhaps a hundred incredibly valuable pluridium-tipped cables. It looked remotely like Medusa's hair.

"Glad to see you made it in," Palmer smiled.

"I've got something to show you, Dr. Krolich and Dr. Chambers--I need them to check my figures.

"I'm sorry, Mael. Krolich is dead."

Varl grew pale. A single chart fell from his arms.

"It's terrible," Varl shook his head slowly, stooping down to pick up the chart. "Martin, we've

got to crack this Hypermotility problem." He shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe what I've got here is just another dead end. When do you suppose we could talk about it? Dr. Chambers is on board, isn't he?"

"Most likely. I've got something I want to discuss too--a couple of things--maybe."

"Could you come to my cabin now?"

Palmer hesitated. Something new on Hypermotility? Everything fled his mind: the shuttle, the Ahrgolians, the trouble with the ferryship, even Evanna's death was gone. Something new? "Great! I'll . . ."

"Colonel," Jenson's voice tranzed inside Palmer's head. "Could you come to the bridge? We're ready to secure the ship."

"I'd like nothing better," he answered Varl with complete honesty. "But I'm needed on the bridge. I'll get with you just as soon as we're safely off. It's a promise."

Varl nodded. Palmer turned away from him and trotted up the corridor.

The command bubble thronged with heightened activity. Crewmembers hovered above their control stations, their faces under-lit with color from panel readouts and indicators. Their expressions seemed glazed, but Palmer knew better. Data was streaming in and out of their minds at incredible speeds via tranzing networks. Of course, each panel was equipped with manual overrides, but they were used only as backups. The biotranzes were so much faster. Palmer glanced around the room at the view screens. Ticking, pre-launch checklists scrolled across them, and nearly all the indicator panels shone a reassuring green.

Palmer stepped up to Jenson, who was testing the control stick. The burly pilot glanced over his shoulder at him and nodded.

"Seal her up, then." Palmer said over the drone of the command bubble.

Jenson smiled, barely containing his relief. "Yes sir! I wondered if we would ever get this far. It's a miracle to me."

Palmer glanced at the weather readout. "How're the storms holding?"

"Just on the stable side of slippery," Jenson replied. As he spoke, the screen cleared then displayed an updated view of the enhanced weather scene Palmer had called up earlier. "There are three new multiple tornado vortexes out there--see along the mountains? They're just stirring around in circles, not going anywhere."

"How many are there?"

Jenson cleared his throat. "Twenty-seven, total."

"Remember the launch dangers we'll have if we get a sizable quake?" It was an unnecessary question, but Palmer felt better having asked it.

Jenson nodded gravely. "We just can't *have* any large quakes until the P-Q-I'S near launch potential."

"How long now?"

Jenson glanced at the chronometer, scanned the view screens and shrugged. "An hour, if we push things. We've already saved about twenty minutes. I don't dare cut any more corners."

"What if we do get a quake before then?"

"Emergency thrusters. I've put them on standby. We can't use them for sustained flight, but at least they can lift us out of here to, say, fifty kilometers away in any direction. If we do move using just the thrusters, we've got to make sure we come down in stable weather or we may never get out of here. Navigation has us pointed into the calmest weather we can find--on a dying world."

Palmer smiled ruefully. "South of here, I hope," Palmer added, thinking of Cosgrove and the

shuttle.

Jenson shook his head. "Sorry, Colonel. Take a look south."

All hope drained out of him. A wall of storms many times more violent than the one already ravaging the city had spawned less than a hundred kilometers away. The data on the super-storm flowed across the screen in flashing red. Palmer tranzed up an enhanced visual. Hundreds of F5 tornadoes clustered in complexes of twenty or thirty. Their wind speeds exceeded two thousand kilometers per hour. They shone red-hot from internal frictions and lightning arced among them in a steady flow. The chances of either the shuttle or the ferryship successfully navigating that kind weather dropped to less than one in fifty.

"Where are you, Cogs?" Palmer said softly. "What's happened?" For the first time, Palmer faced the very real possibility that they might have to leave the Ahrgolians behind. They might be dead already.

Palmer whispered under his breath. "And there's nothing I can do!" After a time he turned to Jenson. "We've *got* to go! Do everything you can to get us moving."

Jenson set his expression. "Yes, Colonel," he said evenly. "I am, Sir."

Palmer took a deep breath and let it out. "Sorry. I . . . I know you're already doing incredible things here. I'm . . ."

"Thank you, sir." Jenson's face relaxed. "We'll rescue em' yet."

Palmer nodded. He had become a nuisance. He had to get out of here--get out of their way. He left quickly.

Despair threatened to overwhelm him. Too much had happened in too short a time. Exhaustion was oozing in on him even through the dope that had kept him going. Suddenly lightheaded, he staggered to his quarters. Inside, he went straight over and flopped onto the bed.

The room was dark. Outside, the winds whistled about the fuselage, screeching in strange harmonies among the throbbing drones of the P-Q-I feeders. Palmer turned on his back and opened the room's view screen. He looked with dulled eyes into the murky twilight of the storm.

Occasional flashes of lavender and blue-white lightning cut the muddled darkness, casting an eerie light upon what could be seen of the landing port. He tried to push the picture of Evanna's death from his mind. A new image skewed over it. Now he saw himself lying beneath the rubble. He clamped his eyes tight, as if the resulting pain might exorcise the horror. Instead, he saw worlds explode. His home was drenched in flames caught in a ghastly cyclone. The world of his childhood cracked at the seams . . .

His eyes stung at the reality of it. There was no escape. Years ago, his parents, and now Evanna, Krolich, Cosgrove, Gaultor—all were dead, or as good as dead. He shut his eyes tightly and saw the beam swing down to crush Evanna.

This couldn't be the end, it just couldn't! Palmer turned his back to the storm.

The floor shook Palmer from his bed. Adrenaline burned in his body and he was on his feet. He reeled against a panicking dizziness, steadied himself and headed out toward the command bubble.

"Colonel Palmer," Jenson's voice tranzed in his mind.

"What's going on?" Palmer tranzed back. He arrived at the Command bubble. Jenson swiveled to face him.

"We're twenty minutes to orbit, Colonel--*twenty minutes* until we can get the P-Q-I to work.

We just had a quake--seven point five on the Richter. We've got to get out of here. Now!"

"Any luck contacting Cosgrove? Is he back yet?"

"Nothing. But we just got a reply from FedComm on sensors. They're sending a Titan B Transport, but it won't reach us for forty-eight hours."

"How's the storm front holding?"

As if in reply, an alarm flooded the room. All attention focused on the main view screen. Bright red letters played across it.

W E A T H E R E M E R G E N C Y:

STORM FRONT DISRUPTION. TORNADO COMPLEX IS NOW MULTIPLYING BY A FACTOR OF THREE PER FIVE MINUTES. PERCENTAGE OF FUNNEL CLOUDS CONTACTING PLANET SURFACE IS 87%. FRONT IS NOW DRIFTING TOWARD THIS VESSEL, AS PREDICTED. MINIMUM TIME TO FIRST TORNADO CONTACT IS ESTIMATED AT 22 MINUTES. SAFE ESCAPE WINDOW IS NO MORE THAN 16 MINUTES: 18 SECONDS.

COUNTDOWN: 16:17; 16:15; 16:14 . . .

"Eighteen minutes at the outside, Colonel. Eighteen!" Jenson shook his head, almost as if he had read Palmer's thoughts. He was perspiring freely.

"That's not good enough. Get us out of here in ten, Jenson. I don't care how you do it, but get us out of here in no more than ten minutes!"

"I'll have to use the thrusters. Are you sure, sir? We might need them worse later on . . ."

"Do it, if you have to." Palmer's insides twisted.

Outside, the ground lurched and heaved as if alive, but the spasmodic churning meant only death for this world. Steam and gasses jetted from cracks in the pavement around the ship. The fissures glowed in oranges and reds from lava swelling beneath.

A sea of brimstone and bizarre fire swirls crept across the landing field toward the ferryship. Maybe the end wouldn't come from the storms. Toxic gasses from the fissures ionized like auroras--blues, greens, whites, and oranges.

This was the end. Ahrgol slipped into phase two of Hypermotility. The convulsing world could explode any time now, for phase two meant planetary detonation.

CHAPTER FOUR
Exodus

Hundreds of kilometers to the east, a crippled shuttle languished beneath the fierce gales of Hypermotility. Clustered about it were the cracked and empty houses that were all that remained of the Ahrgolian village. The shuttle's maser beacons scanned the heavens many times per second, urgently beaming its unique distress signal. Within the vessel, filling nearly every one of the 120-seat cabin, a silent congregation of Ahrgolians watched Cosgrove attempting to do repair work.

Cursing under his breath, the lanky Federation lieutenant threw a tool hard against the floor of the cabin. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead with a damp handkerchief and rubbed the salty sweat from his stinging eyes. He lay on his back and took several, deliberate deep breaths in a vain attempt to relax. Then he returned to the scarred crumple of circuit complexes one more time. He had replaced the vital boards with spares kept in emergency storage. That had allowed the beacons to function, but the cradle array for guidance was gnarled and twisted.

Cosgrove's handiwork consisted of cables of all sizes and lengths. He had rigged them from the open end of a connector and bypassed the border contacts of the master boards. It was maddening that no reliable signal could pass through. He tried tranzing the onboard computer again, but it was deathly silent. If only he could awaken it, it could tell him exactly where he had made a mistake or which of the thirty some thousand molec-chips might have gone bad. It could then etch a replacement from the virgin chips it had in storage, and the ship might be operable again.

Might be. The computer remained silent.

He pushed himself from beneath the master panel and climbed into the pilot's seat. Again, he tried the computer through the keyboard. Several error messages appeared--the same ones he had been seeing for the last several hours. He couldn't get past even the lowest levels of function. The computer must be fatally damaged. At last Cosgrove faced the possibility that he would soon die, and with him, over a hundred Ahrgolians.

The gaze of more than a hundred pair of questioning eyes rested on him. He tried avoiding the stares. Still, he looked up at them briefly. Men, women and children sat uncomfortably in the comfortable seats. They were clean and dressed neatly, though the ferocity of the winds and rains outside had mussed them considerably. These people, living near a hand-to-mouth existence, looked terribly out of place. Some of the women wore robes of bright colors and intricate patterns. Their faces were devoid of makeup and their hair was stretched back and tied simply. These seemed primitive agriculturists, like the ones described in the fragmentary legends of the lost worlds of the Dawn Era.

Primitives.

Primitives? Here was a strange dichotomy. The expressions these Ahrgolians wore looked anything but primitive. In meeting with the Ahrgolians as a group when he had returned, Cosgrove had discovered that education and sophistication resided here. These people may have lived a simple life, but there was nothing simplistic about what motivated them to do so.

"Will the Federationists now accept Zorl as the sole source of escape?" one of the shamans said quietly. Cosgrove looked over at him. Ever since the first quake had damaged the ship, this shaman had repeated the same phrase each and every time Cosgrove had emerged from the racks to run tests. There was Education, yes--and fanaticism.

Tired and frustrated, Cosgrove snapped back an answer. "I'm a little busy right now, in case you hadn't noticed."

Several of the shamans turned to look at Gaultor in unison. Cosgrove followed their visual cue, but the Mhyrnian only shut his eyes. The spokesman shaman turned back to Cosgrove. "Without belief in Zorl, we must all die here--unless you can repair your vessel." There was a pause. "Can you?"

Cosgrove picked up the tool he had thrown earlier and swung beneath the panel again. He would check for shorts in the jumpers one more time.

Gaultor bowed his head, his eyes remaining closed. The Creator *could* save them, but to call upon His powers now, in the presence of an infidel, would be a sacrilege. Unless all present would keep the resulting miracle sacred among themselves, discussing it only with other believers, the powers of Zorl were not to be used. Many of the Noble Ones had faced death rather than reveal to infidels the incredible power they held within themselves. Gaultor thought back upon the example of Ambylor, the Martyr, and tried to gather strength from it. He struggled inwardly. Earlier, Boorton, the youngest of the council, had suggested killing Cosgrove, that Gaultor might save them, but Gaultor had refused. He would not kill an innocent man, even an infidel. That was not the way of the Creator. Gaultor turned now to Boorton.

"It seems that we shall die here. Have the others prepare themselves."

Boorton's face went pale. "Is there no reasoning with you, Great One? Must we all perish because of this," his face grew red, "this mocking Federationist?"

"Lower your voice, Boorton. It is not the way of the Brotherhood. You know the commandments of Zorl. You swore to obey them when you joined the Covenant. What we face now comes, sometimes, to those who serve. The sacred, Eternal Secrets must not be revealed or used except for the benefit of those who believe, or at times of destruction when there is a good chance that the sacred ways will be altogether lost."

"But we face such a time of destruction *now*, Great One," Boorton whispered. His voice hissed near audibility. "Use the Eternal Secrets, or you will die with this world. You *are* the One from the far heavens spoken of! I know it! We all know it. Can't you see? With your death, the sacred ways die also. All shall die!"

Gaultor thought for a moment. "We do not know that. There *must* be others on Mhyrn who yet hold the Eternal Secrets. I cannot believe that I, an exile from Mhyrn, am the only one left."

"But you *may* be! The prophecies . . ."

Gaultor stammered, "But I am not on Mhyrn! What good can be done here? The Lost Master is on Mhyrn! Even if I were *The One*, it is impossible to go to there. No Federationist ship would ever be allowed safe passage! I cannot be *The One*. Surely you can see this . . ."

"We cannot take the chance that you are not."

"I *am* not!"

"You cannot say that for certain. With the Creator all things can be accomplished. Is this not so?"

"I will consider," Gaultor said after a moment. "Meanwhile, tell the others to prepare."

The shaman hesitated. Gaultor could see that he was struggling against saying more. At last, Boorton nodded his head once, eyes closed, and began to pass the word.

As Gaultor reflected, he heard the stifled cries and quiet astonishment from both men and

women. He looked aside to see a young Ahrgolian mother cling her infant tightly to her breast as the word spread. He looked away quickly. He grieved most for the children. *Their* faith would be the most sorely tested, for their understanding was least. He fought the smarting in his eyes. At that moment he almost unleashed the Eternal Secrets: the Golden Death. But years of discipline halted him. Instead he prayed silently. He beseeched the Creator that these little ones might yet be saved--that somehow this Federationist might repair the ship. He pleaded that he might not have to face using the Eternal Secrets before the eyes of one who would surely ridicule holy things.

Then a new thought struck him. The Eternal Secrets might not even respond with a disbeliever here, unless . . . unless Gaultor *were* The One spoken of in the prophecies--The Holy Man of power. Gaultor dared not assume such, and so he prayed again for rescue. After a while he turned to Boorton.

"I cannot," was all Gaultor said.

Boorton took a deep breath, and nodded once. He then turned to his own prayers.

Gaultor's mind drifted for a time. He thought of his mother and father, killed before his eyes by Federationist mobs. Somehow, the vision did not stir him to anger this time. Perhaps facing death softened one's hatreds. He would soon be joining them, and the thought swelled inside him to joy.

He drifted peaceful in the prospect for a time.

Then he thought back to his meeting with Palmer. Here, he hesitated, perplexed. Palmer was utterly different from those who had killed his Family. Whatever the Federation Colonel might think within, Gaultor recognized the man's outward respect for a stranger's beliefs. Gaultor had never seen this in any Federationist. Even Cosgrove was barely tolerant of them, or so it seemed. Still, Cosgrove had tried to rescue them, and the ship, though damaged, had intended to take them to safety from the destructions of Echion's Eye.

This Palmer was different. Palmer was a man of honor--an *infidel* of character. He almost smiled at the contradiction.

Boorton's words flashed through his mind again. They were not new words, but their strength struck him. "With the Creator all things can be accomplished." What if Boorton was right about Gaultor being the Holy Man of the prophecies? And what if. . . what if Palmer . . .

If only there could be an escape, Gaultor could investigate the Federation Colonel more carefully.

Thunder cracked cruelly outside. Gaultor sighed. He would never have the opportunity to see. The Creator would end his life here. It did not matter. A Holy Man of Zorl would be raised up when the times were full. And whomever the Infidel of the prophecies might be, it would certainly need to be a man of greatness. Of this, Gaultor now had complete knowledge. The Holy Man and the Infidel would have to be one in purpose--unified and resolute.

As for the man Gaultor, his mission was over. He faced the end in peace. He had lived the ways of Zorl and of the Creator faithfully, all his life. Eternity waited before him like a jewel, glistening in bright sunlight.

A massive quake shuddered the crust of Ahrgol. Gaultor braced himself. If he could but endure the pains *preceding* death . . .

Behind the shuttle, a row of Ahrgolian huts shattered. The ground cracked wide. Children began wailing. One of the shamans buried his face in his hands and began sobbing.

Cosgrove emerged from beneath the panel. He knew that their time was gone. He sat quietly in the pilot's seat and tried one last time to raise the ship. The engines whined to life briefly, only to clatter and sputter in final death. Sparks and flashes of light arced from the panels. *This was really it.*

Again the ground lurched in a tremor. The ship rocked and heaved. It slid sideways with a screeching jar, then twisted onto its side at a precarious angle. Ahrgolians not strapped in toppled from their seats. Screams erupted as the cabin lights died. Panic swept across some. They scrambled to the hatch, blasting it open with the emergency escape switch. The acrid stench of a world's death poured in through the opening. Cosgrove shouted at them to stay inside--that toxic gasses would kill them. But he gave up. Which death was worst, death in your home from poison gasses or death by crushing within a strange, *infidel* ship?

The cabin boiled with frenzied humanity, scrambling to escape. Another quake hit, completely upending the shuttle. A pulverizing flash heralded the final death of the ship's ion generators. Lightning shone nearly continuously through the open hatch as people fought to escape. Cosgrove looked around the cabin in despair. Gaultor knelt to pick up a hoarsely crying infant from the limp arms of its dead mother. As if sensing Cosgrove's gaze, the Most High Nobleman looked back at him. There was none of the hatred Cosgrove had seen earlier. Instead, he saw an expression he couldn't explain--it seemed full of innocence, or perhaps peace or . . .

Dazzling lightning flashed suddenly golden. Bizarre thunder exploded immediately on the ship. Cosgrove slumped into unconsciousness.

The ferryship hovered precariously against the violent winds that churned about the shattered village of the Ahrgolians. Within, Palmer watched the sensor screens. Searcher beams scanned the ruined terrain. Indefinable shapes crawled across the screens. There was no longer any beacon signal from the shuttle. It had ceased abruptly less than five minutes earlier. The ferryship had picked it up as soon as it had launched. It had struggled around terrible gales and bizarre thunderheads on as direct a course as the ship could safely navigate. Now, they were fumbling blind.

Nothing.

The auxiliary stabilizers glitched several times.

"We've got to get out of here, Colonel," Jenson said quietly.

"Just a few minutes more," Palmer replied, not taking his gaze from the view screen.

Nothing but rocks, debris, and coughing lava.

The lights suddenly flickered out. Warning alarms sounded and the emergency reds came on. Palmer looked back at Jenson.

"We just lost one of our support thrusters. I've compensated, but I don't know how much more of this we can take."

Palmer nodded gravely. "Very well. Take us up."

The ship's engines began to climb.

"Wait," the sensor officer tranzed. "I think I've got a metal contact. Yaw a little more to starboard. Yes. A metal contact about the size of a shuttle."

Without waiting for Palmer's order, Jenson swung the ferryship around, homing on the metallic finding.

The ship buffeted in the winds. A familiar shape emerged gradually through the murky haze of the tempest. "It *is* the shuttle," someone said. Its nose and tail were crumpled but the cabin section was virtually untouched.

Palmer gazed at it in astonishment. The vessel floated serenely upon a smooth slab of rock on a glowing sea of lava. Smoldering bodies lay all around the crippled ship. The shuttle's main hatch had been blown.

"Could anyone survive in that hell?" Jenson said quietly. Palmer couldn't imagine.

"Pull it in," he said. "I want full support coverage. We don't know how badly damaged the superstructure is."

A deep blue aura appeared around the wreckage of the shuttle. It lifted slowly from its charred lifeboat of rock and drifted upward. The floor stirred beneath Palmer's feet--undoubtedly the bay doors opening.

With the shuttle in tow, the ferryship lifted gradually from its low hover. The winds rocked it several times, once violently enough to sound an alarm. The ferryship broke through the clouds. Immediately the winds calmed to a fraction of their former fury. It was night again. Lightning flowed among storms in every imaginable hue. Palmer watched the distorted thunderheads fall away beneath them.

Suddenly a geyser of molten, yellow-orange lava erupted up through the clouds. It spewed past the ferryship high into the stratosphere. Palmer watched it, transfixed. Sparkling pinpoints far brighter than the lava swirled across its surface like fireflies.

Still, the ferryship climbed.

Expansive auroras of rich blues and greens danced between the ship and the stars. Their patterns were spectacular. Dazzling lightning forked across them. It took Palmer's breath away. Never had he seen such incredible displays. Hypermotility was surely the most fearsome death a planet might suffer, but its beauty was staggering.

There was a slight stir through the ship. "The shuttle is aboard," Jenson said evenly. "We're secure."

"Is anyone alive?"

Jenson paused, listening to the tranzed response. His face relaxed. He nodded.

"Amazing," Palmer said quietly, shaking his head. "All right. Let's get out of here."

Anxious P-Q-I engines erupted into raw, blue-white power. The ferryship tore suddenly away from the planet, accelerating in moments to thousands of kilometers per hour.

Palmer swiveled to look back at the stricken world dropping quickly beneath them. The auroras and lightning arrays covered the planet in a stroboscopic web. They hurt the eyes to look upon. The blinding shock wave ring whirled about a scintillating core of Procyxian blue brilliance. Abruptly it collapsed to nothing. The auroras snuffed out, leaving the planet dark--a mere crescent for a few moments. Palmer held his breath. The world turned red. Waves of flame rippled across it as the atmosphere blew away from the planet. Huge jets of magma spewed dark, continent-sized debris into space. Ahrgol's molten core shuddered for an instant and then burst. A billion, billion scintillating shards of dazzling colors sprayed outward from the blast in an intricate, spiraling maelstrom. Gradually, the destruction diminished into complete darkness. The colored splinters winked out like dying sparks.

Silence ruled the control bubble for a time, underscored only by the sounds of the ship's quiet, throbbing hums.

It was Jenson who first turned away from the apocalypse. He carefully steered the ship into the treacherous waste that was all that remained of the disintegrating solar system.

The ferryship moved relatively slowly, far below light speed. The P-Q-I engines were restrained well beneath their full potential to ensure safe passage. At this rate it would take hours before they might phase to hyperspace.

Palmer turned to gaze at the sun of Ahrgol. It oozed apart in trailing, convoluting streams. Its oddly dynamic light cast stark light on the congregations of huge asteroids that drifted ahead. The

ferryship slowed.

"Roll 235 degrees to port," someone tranzed generally. "You ought to see this."

Jenson rolled the ferryship.

Huge sections of formerly exquisite planets crept past them. A massive rock, perhaps the size of a small continent, tumbled by ever so slowly.

"Look," someone said quietly. From the nearest edge, Palmer caught glintings as from glass or steel. A city! At the edge of the disemboweled continent a city had somehow managed to remain intact against the ruinous forces of planetary death. Palmer studied it. This was no native of the Ahrgolian worlds. How could it have come here? The nearest ruined solar system was light years away. Nothing could cross that distance to mingle with the debris of Ahrgol's worlds unless it had been hurled here through hyperspace. Palmer could not imagine how that could be, yet here was a city from a world that had died from Hypermotility, light years away.

The phantom city vanished into shadow.

A reflective pause lingered in the control bubble. Further planetary skeletons turned eerily beyond the ship. They whispered a desolate haunting.

Palmer thought on that feeling for a time. If the galaxy survived, stories might be told of these dead cities--ghost stories about the lost worlds of Hypermotility.

"We're clearing ahead," Jenson announced.

Palmer turned to look forward. Ahead were the stars. The remaining asteroid debris slipped quickly past as the ship accelerated.

"Increasing speed to eighty percent optical. Full computer guidance engaged. As soon as we clear the Oort cloud we'll jump to the rendezvous point with the Titan Battle transport *Enigma*. All hands, ship status is now at amber."

There was a general stir of relief. Several of the crew sat back in their seats stretching. Palmer, who had been seated nearby, turned to Jenson. The pilot's face was somber. His eyes were bloodshot and his hair was mussed and oily.

"You all right?" Palmer asked.

"Fine, Colonel. Although even half an hour of sleep would be nice."

"How long has it been since you've *had* any decent sleep?"

Jenson shook his head. "A week, I guess. I've been boost-tranzing for at least that long. Once we reach the rendezvous point, I'll pull the plug."

Palmer smiled. "Who's your Deleg' pilot?"

Jenson didn't answer right away. At last he said. "My son."

"Of course. I keep forgetting you pilots have a guild now. I should think even an apprentice could supervise this. Couldn't he take her from here out? Where is he?"

"Yes he could," Jenson answered, staring at nothing. A trace of a smile appeared. "He could have lifted us from Ahrgol. A good pilot--really good pilot. Natural talent. Took to tranzing like breathing, too."

Palmer waited.

"We were to have gone home before the Ahrgol emergency . . ."

"You lost him?" Palmer asked quietly.

Jenson's smile faded into pain, well under control, but visible nonetheless.

"He was aft when the EQ shifted. He's the one that . . ." his voice faltered.

"I'm so sorry," Palmer muttered clumsily. He felt sick at having yelled Jenson down about shutting off the P-Q-I.

"Look, Captain . . ." Palmer began, but Jenson waved him silent.

"It's okay, Colonel. Thanks. It does help."

They were quiet.

"Where're you from?" Palmer changed the subject.

"The Encyclopedia worlds," Jenson replied, welcoming the change. His face relaxed a bit. "Josephus, actually."

Palmer knew of the Encyclopedia worlds. They were located well away from the present ruins of Hypermotility. Palmer looked at Jenson's wrists for the telltale striping of the record keepers. Jenson smiled.

"Everyone looks for them, Colonel. I'm not a native. Celeste and I moved there when FedComm needed an *intentor*. My wife's of Mestrate lineage."

Palmer sat up. The Mestrates. He had never actually known anyone of that legendary descent. Jenson smiled again.

"She's an Intentor--an extrapolator--can read between the lines. She can even tell if the writer was lying or under duress or whatever." He chuckled. "Craziest thing being married to her. I could speak a lie to her, straight faced and she'd never know. But if I ever lied in *writing* you bet she could see it. You ought to see how many drafts I'd do of a love letter before I dared sending it to her."

They smiled at each other.

"Sure miss her," Jenson said after a pause. His face stiffened again, then he forced another smile.

"What about you, Colonel?"

Palmer thought seriously of Arrleen, now. It was the first time he had allowed himself that luxury since Ahrgol went into Hypermotility. The memory he chose was one of several he had deliberately stored using an RNA implant. He had wanted to make sure he could recall *this particular* memory of Arrleen with perfect clarity--like a living snap shot.

The western sky was awash in the warm amber of day's end. The forest was drenched in orange and cool, steel blue. The smell of the pines, burning wood and dead leaves filled the air.

Palmer sat propped against the house, at one with the deepening night. Merrisense and Bronzewash, the twin moons, hovered in golden crescent just above the far mountains.

Arrleen appeared in silhouette against the horizon, walking up the little path from the lake to their tree. The fringes of her hair glowed with the sunset and her trim body moved with a dancer's grace. He could not see her face, but her voice was like music and her laugh a catching lyric.

"Think you're on a salary?" she laughed. His shovel leaned next to him against the tree. "Come on! We still have . . ." She paused. He could just see that smile in the shadows. It took his breath now as it had then. "Okay, Colonel. Enough is enough." She dropped the potato sack on the ground beside his shovel and joined him.

She enthralled him, pulling the hair away from her bronze profile and gazing into the sunlight. The moisture of her eye sparkled like a golden star. She pulled her knees up against her chin, wrapping her arms around them. She bit at her lower lip, then closed her eyes for a moment. She made a soft, lyrical sigh and looked at the sunset. The amber light turned her to gold. Palmer watched her--stared at her . . .

"Colonel?"

"Sorry. Just thinking. I'm from Beruna. It's a world of forests--everywhere. There are trees so big you can build a house inside one--I mean right inside the trunk, and it doesn't even hurt the tree.

There are all kinds of pines there, and aspen. My home is *in* one of those old huge trees. There's such a feeling you get living inside. I mean the walls are living wood. The feelings you get there are--it's hard to describe--peaceful; heavy in a good way--I can't put it into words. Arrleen thinks it's maybe the life of the tree that we feel. I don't know. Sounds too mystical to me. I tease her about it. Still, I feel something amazing there. Sure do miss it."

"Children?"

Palmer shook his head. "Not yet. Some day, if I can ever get back to Arrleen--whenever this mess is over. No, maybe even before then. I'm due for leave after we get picked up."

"Me too. I don't know how I should tell Celeste about Aaron. I know one thing. I'm sure not going to write her about it."

Palmer nodded, understanding.

"Why don't *you* get some sleep, Colonel?"

Palmer grinned. "Does it show that much?"

"There's no reason you shouldn't. I'm going to as soon as I can. So go on. You're cluttering up my bridge . . . sir."

"I will. I just want to check on the shuttle people." He yawned.

"Cut that out. It's contagious . . . sir."

Palmer smiled.

"Oort cloud seventy minutes away," the bridge-wide announcement tranzed inside Palmer's head.

Jenson swiveled forward. Palmer turned his seat to exit mode and climbed off. He looked back at the pilot, who was already concentrating on the tranzed information pouring into his head again. Jenson yawned.

Palmer left the control bubble. For the first time, he felt a semblance of relief. The mutilated solar system of Ahrgol was, at last, behind them. Rescue would come as soon as they rendezvoused with the Titan Battle Transport, less than a day away.

He headed down the ramp into the central corridor. Soon, he turned off to one of the branching halls that lead to the infirmary. Every compartment was filled. The people Palmer saw were bandaged and mostly unconscious or asleep. Medi-scanners hovered over the worst, bathing their bandaged areas in rich, gentian violet *rejuv* beams.

In one of the cubicles, Palmer found Cosgrove's still form resting beneath a Medi-scanner. He studied Cogs more closely and found him breathing slowly. Palmer sighed in relief. Cosgrove seemed to be in fairly good shape. A medic in a nearby cubicle looked up briefly from taking notes on a seriously injured woman. Two scanners all but engulfed her in their violet rays. Her face was peaceful. The medic walked over to him.

"Have we lost anyone since we lifted from Ahrgol?" Palmer asked.

"No, sir." The medic smiled. "The woman I was just checking was injured on our approach to Ahrgol--an astrosociologist, I believe. Don't know her name."

"How is she doing?"

"Very well. She was pretty serious--broken back, severed spinal cord and a bad head fracture. I just checked the rejuv. It's almost finished sorting and rejoining all the nerves in the spinal cord. It's looking for peripheral nerve damage now. Then it will finish mending the bones. She should be all right in a few hours."

"What about him?" Palmer gestured to Cosgrove.

"Not bad at all. Concussion, minor contusions, smoke inhalation and a few first and second

degree burns. Fatigue too--awful fatigue. The scanners should have him up and around in a couple of hours. They're mostly inducing sleep now. When he first came in . . . I swear, the only way I could keep him down was to put him under like this. He regained consciousness just after the scanners healed his concussion and the worst of his burns. He wanted to get up. I've had him asleep ever since. Fought it all the way under."

Palmer smiled. That was Cogs.

"There were quite a few dead on board the shuttle when we finished pulling her in. Those that survived had just cuts and bruises--a few broken bones. We're fixing the last of them now.

"It was the funniest thing though," the medic said, reflecting. Palmer only half heard him. "By all accounts, no one should have survived."

"How's that?"

"When we got the shuttle aboard, we ran a check of cabin atmosphere--standard procedure on volcanic rescues of this sort. And, Colonel, I swear that cabin was full of toxic gasses--enough to kill everyone on board several times over. Cyanide made up more than twenty percent of the mix."

Palmer stared dumbfounded. "You must be mistaken."

"That's what we thought. We checked the readings, twice. No mistake. So we dumped the poison stuff before any of the rescue teams boarded, just to be sure. Once inside we found about fifty-five people not only alive but free from any signs of toxicity. We pulled them out fast and brought them up here for more thorough checks just to be on the safe side. I set the Medi-scanners to treat toxicity first, but among all those people nothing of that variety has been found. I frankly can't understand this one."

A strange feeling came over Palmer. For a moment he wondered about Gaultor and Ambylor and ancient religions and claims of great powers. For the first time he wondered about Zorl, really wondered at the possible veracity of at least some of Gaultor's religious notions. After a moment he shook it aside. It just *couldn't* be. "Your instruments must have been wrong. You know what Hypermotility can do to equipment."

"Hmm. Well, yes. I guess I hadn't really thought of *that* as a possibility, but I suppose it could be. No wait. Come to think of it they *did* check for HyperM distortions--I, I think. Everything was so stirred up, I may be remembering things wrong. I'll call up the probers and have them check the calibration on their sensors. Yes, yes, yes. It must have been the Hypermotility."

Palmer thought of Gaultor. "What about a tall, Mhyrnian shaman?"

The medic thought for a moment. "A Mhyrnian? There was a lot of confusion as we cleared the wreckage. I vaguely remember a tall man in red robes handing me a screaming infant. The baby's fine. A Mhyrnian, you say? Yes. Maybe that was a Mhyrnian." The medic thought for a moment. "White hair," he added suddenly. "I remember now--he looked too young to have that white hair. Yep, most likely your Mhyrnian."

"Was he injured?"

"No. Wait, yes. He did have some injuries. Strange though."

"What?"

"Well, everyone else had the kinds of injuries you would expect from earthquakes. Not him."

"I don't understand."

"All he had were burns."

"Burns?"

"On his hands. First and second degree--a few blisters--like his hands had been caught in a flash fire."

"The ship was floating on lava."

"Yeah, I know. So why wasn't anyone else burned, then? And why just his hands?"

"Were the instrument panels scorched? Any signs of a fire there?"

"Well, yes. But . . . Oh. I see. Well, yes. Maybe he was helping your shuttle pilot. But then why wasn't he burned, too?"

"Maybe he was checking something away from the panel and having the Mhyrnian help."

"Maybe."

Whatever the explanation, Palmer was glad Gaultor had survived. Still, it was an odd notion. What could Gaultor possibly have done to assist Cosgrove? The ship's computer should have been all Cogs needed.

"You said the Mhyrnian shaman has recovered?"

The medic nodded. "Fully."

"Do you know where he might be now?"

"No, sir."

"Well, thanks," Palmer said. He took a final, grateful look at Cosgrove and headed out of the infirmary.

He moved down the hall, so terribly tired all of a sudden. Later, he only vaguely recalled going to his room and climbing onto the bed. This time he slept deeply.

"Approaching the Oort cloud," a tranz stirred Palmer awake. He felt the engines throttle back as the ferryship slowed in its passage through the dark realms of sleeping comets. He sat up, feeling immeasurably better. After taking care of his personal needs, he headed out into the corridor toward the command bubble.

"Colonel," a voice called to him. He turned to see a security man coming up from behind. "I thought you should know, sir--the Ahrgolians all seem to be gathering in the observation cabin."

"I see. Is there a problem?"

"Well, sir--seeing as a Mhyrnian is their leader I thought it might mean trouble."

"Oh," Palmer felt a twinge of disdain for the remark. So what if a Mhyrnian was their leader? "Thanks," he said simply. "I'll check on the matter personally."

"Do you want an escort, sir?"

Palmer rubbed the back of his neck to blunt evidence of his sudden indignation. "I'll be all right," he said finally. "Tell your men to take it easy. I think everything's fine."

"Aye, sir," the man said. There was a curious look on his face, but he walked past him toward the bridge. Palmer looked after him for a moment then turned toward the observation bubble.

He shook his head. There was a *lot* of prejudice. Then Palmer tried to see things from the security man's perspective--his professional perspective.

Had the Ahrgolians gone there of their own accord? What if Gaultor had gathered them? He had to admit that the latter prospect did worry him some. While it was true their lives had been saved because of a Federation rescue, old hatreds usually died hard. Once a crisis demanding cooperation had passed, people pretty much went back to the way they were before. He considered what might happen if Gaultor did decide to seize the ship. There were some fifty able followers. Fortunately, none had weapons. Did they? Probably not. Palmer assumed that the Ahrgolians had been checked for energy weapons. But what if they hadn't? Surely, they had been. Should he order a second check? No. That would be an insult, especially when he was trying to bridge differences, not

widen them.

So. What would happen if they attempted a takeover without weapons? He quickly envisioned, then analyzed possible scenarios. It most likely couldn't work. He felt confident that the ship's security contingent, armed and determined, could easily contain any such action.

And yet, he could not completely dismiss a vague uneasiness.

He rationalized further. Who among these simple people could pilot a Federation starship, even if he did manage to seize it? Tranzing made all sorts of terrorism next to impossible, unless the instigators knew exactly what they were doing. Somewhat comforted by this new thought, Palmer dismissed the matter and strolled aft.

The observation cabin was spacious and comfortable for a military vessel. Tiered rows of couches faced wide view screens covering the walls. They afforded a broad, panoramic view of space beyond the ferryship. A lounge stood on a plateau at the center of the ovoid cabin. Ahrgolians stood in lines around several food dispenser ports. Only a few of the crew were here. They sat by themselves or chatted in small groups. No one mingled with the Ahrgolians.

Among the rescued were men, women and children. From their bright, varicolored robes Palmer surmised most of the men to be shamans. One group in blue spoke in low voices. Frequently they would glance at the crew. The look on their faces could not be in any way mistaken: hatred. One of them spotted Palmer and glared openly at him. The shaman next to him didn't appear to be Ahrgolian. Palmer couldn't place him. Perhaps he was a pilgrim to Gaultor's assemblage. This non-Ahrgolian wore a large amulet around his neck that he clutched tightly in one hand. When he saw Palmer, he bared his teeth as if in a defiant challenge. Palmer felt a flush of indignation. The Federation had just saved his life, and this was the thanks they got? After a moment Palmer broke his gaze to search for Gaultor.

He found the Mhyrnian near the far end of the room. He stood a full head above everyone else. He, of all the planet-death-grimed natives, looked virtually unscathed.

The Mhyrnian gazed in a private reverence at a single, brilliant star: Procyx. The point of shining blue seared the jet-black emptiness of space. Its light seemed to glint upon Gaultor's thick, white hair, combed straight back from his forehead. There was an almost misty aura about it, like full moonlight resting on new snow.

Palmer walked toward him. He heard a commotion behind him and turned to see the non-Ahrgolian shaman following him toward Gaultor. His fists were clenched and his eyes glazed in wild anger. He quickened his pace to intercept Palmer. The other blue-robed shamans stayed behind, unsure of what to do.

Palmer braced himself, assuming the Kyrellian battle stance. The personal martial discipline was tied to his biotranz and could readily defend him against several such enraged men. His concentration narrowed until there was only himself and the shaman. Everything else dimmed into twilight. The shaman's eyes were vivid. Palmer saw and judged every subtle motion.

Unexpectedly, the shaman slowed.

Why? Was he uncertain now? Did this man know about the Kyrellian techniques? Could he recognize the battle posturing?

"Merin," Gaultor's voice said with quiet power. "Stop."

The shaman halted. His eyes were still fiery, but under control. He glared at Palmer for a long time and then turned away.

Palmer's concentration relaxed and his vision widened again. At last he turned to Gaultor.

"I am sorry, Federation Colonel," Gaultor's accented words rumbled from the Mhyrnian's

throat. "You have saved our lives. Children live who would now be dead were it not for you. Many of these Followers of Zorl cannot yet see this act of compassion. I, myself . . ." Gaultor hesitated, looking down. "I pray you will forgive me. I, myself, still cannot understand this. You have acted so differently from everything I have ever known of Federationists."

Palmer was lost for words.

"I want you to know," Gaultor continued, looking at Palmer squarely again. "I am now responsible for your lives against the End of All Things, as far as I am capable. As long as Zorl grants that I should live, I shall be indebted to you."

Palmer considered how to reply to this. His first desire was to release Gaultor from such a pledge. But he knew well just how seriously some cultures regarded indebtedness to the preservation of life. To dismiss such a rescue and, consequently Gaultor's expression of gratitude, might be the height of insult. Palmer decided, instead, to address the problem of hatred by Mhyrnians of the Federation.

"This is great gift you offer, Gaultor. I and all the crew of this vessel are honored "

Gaultor bowed slightly.

"Gaultor--what is your title?"

"Title?"

"Yes. What do your people call you when they wish to revere you?"

"I am merely one of Noble Ones."

"Noble One," Palmer said quietly. "I revere your oath of protection and safety for us. I know also of your justified anger against the Federation. But may I, in humility, offer an . . . another view, for you to consider?"

Gaultor was silent, but made no objection.

"Thank you. I cannot know the pains you have suffered at the hands of Federationists. They must have been evil . . ."

"Atrocities," Gaultor added quietly.

"Yes. And yet, you say that we are different, that we have saved your lives."

"*You* are different, Federation Colonel. I know not of the others."

"The son of the pilot of this vessel died that the ship might arrive and save you--and us."

Gaultor reflected for a moment. Then he spoke. "That is righteousness."

"Is it not safe to say that there *is* good, as well as evil among us? Is this not so among all peoples? Even among the Gods? Was not Echion cast out for terrible evils?"

"After much destruction--yes. He was imprisoned."

"And the people of Mhyrn. Are all of *them* righteous?" Palmer almost wished he hadn't asked that. If Gaultor was firmly convinced that all Mhyrnians were good, whether they were or not, then his reasoning would fail right here.

"There are both good and evil among my people, as among yours," Gaultor said at last. Palmer breathed easier. Gaultor was intensely devout, but he was no fanatic.

"Then, I humbly suggest the day may come when your people and mine might yet mend our differences. If the good among your people and the good among mine can work together in tolerance--might we become friends?"

Gaultor was silent. He studied Palmer's face carefully. Palmer felt a fleeting surge of deja vu, as if he had said these very words to another Gaultor long ago on a ship headed away from a ruined world. But how could that be? A more likely possibility was a talent inherited from his unique, human ancestor. Palmer was descended from Megan Stillmann, the creator of the Seventh

Federation's governmental structure. She had devised the codes of universal diplomacy that had managed to knit a galaxy of widely diverse cultures together into a unified whole. It seemed that some of the sensitive talents Megan Stillmann had developed might linger in Martin Palmer, generations later. What he had said to Gaultor he truly meant. These were no idle words designed to manipulate another being. At last Gaultor spoke.

"I would like that. If there is time before the End, Zorl would be pleased to see us make our peace."

"And what of the End? Is there no hope for us?"

Gaultor raised his arm and pointed at Procyx. The words he spoke next came smooth and resonant--almost lyrically.

"That burning light is Procyx. In *these* the days of grief, it is the Eye of Echion. At this hour Procyx is the End Star of Grief, searching for its master – even Echion himself.

"Our scriptures tell us that unless we believe and obey the ways of Zorl, Echion's eye of power will destroy all things in favor of *his* evil order. Salvation may yet come to us, but so far there has been none. Procyx still searches, and I fear that a terrible end is at hand.

Palmer held the expression he had on his face.

"But the most ancient--the most sacred records say that before the salvation of Zorl's power, an evil people would come from the far heavens to test and to ruin many of my people. They would try to destroy the old ways--the ways of salvation and bring us all under bondage. Your people have done this."

Palmer squelched a twinge of anger and insult. He waited.

"Federation Colonel--I know that the End is near. The signs appear in undeniable clarity. But there is more to the ancient prophecies. The old, sacred words speak of a Holy Man and an Infidel--working together." Gaultor's voice literally shimmered in excitement. "You, Federation Colonel, are a man of truth. You keep the promises you make. You are the good among your people. Perhaps it may be . . ."

Suddenly, his voice trailed off. His eyes rested upon Palmer's and he felt, suddenly, as if the Mhyrnian were looking directly inside him, studying him. He found that he could not look away. After perhaps a minute's time, the Most High Nobleman looked down, releasing Palmer. The Mhyrnian looked at him again, his eyes sparkling. His face wore an expression Palmer had never seen there until now: a smile. "Let us share the best parts of our peoples' ways, and tolerate the worst. Let us . . ."

Gaultor stopped suddenly, gazing past Palmer at the view screen.

"What is it?" Palmer asked, turning. Immediately he saw that the position of Procyx had changed. His mind fought to understand. Fear clawed at him. He reeled around to see where Merin, the hostile shaman had stood. He was gone.

"Where did he go," Palmer turned back to Gaultor.

"Who?" Gaultor asked.

"That . . . Merin, your follower. Where did he go?"

"I do not know. Why?"

Palmer looked back at the stars. Procyx had completely disappeared beneath the ship. "We're veering off course. Jenson wouldn't do that unless . . . unless he were being forced to."

"I do not understand," Gaultor said, perplexed.

Palmer started toward the entrance. "Someone has taken over the ship." He broke into a run, tranzing Jenson--anybody in the control bubble. There was no reply. He bolted toward the ramp

way.

Gaultor watched him leave, anger kindling in him again. Was this Federationist so *certain* that one of his people had done this unthinkable act? Prejudice, again. His anger deepened. So. Palmer spoke noble words but proved himself quick in assuming that Merin was to blame for the troubles of the ship. Wasn't it possible that the ship had been damaged, or that some peril of space had caused the change in course? He turned his back on Palmer, so smug in his certainty that the Followers of Zorl were *again* responsible for Federationist's failures. He began to doubt what he had seen in Palmer. The old dark resentments boiled up to smother the first vestiges of hope Gaultor had felt in years.

"Noble One," one of the blue robed shamans disturbed his festering. Gaultor composed himself, turning to him. There was fire in the shaman's eyes.

"We have done it," he whispered.

A sick, sinking feeling began to stir within Gaultor. "What have *we* done?"

"This infidel's vessel now serves the will of Zorl!"

"What was it doing before this . . . this *glorious* transformation? Who's will was it serving before?" Gaultor's anger turned from Palmer to the shaman. The other's face paled suddenly. His eyes grew perplexed.

"Why we now control this ship. We are going home, Great One--and these infidels can be tried for the atrocities of which they are so guilty--the death of so many of the Most High Noblemen."

Gaultor buried his face in his hands.

"This does not please you?"

Palmer approached the control bubble with care. His tranzed calls had raised no replies. Now there was a distinct buzzing in his head every time he specifically turned the biotranz to receive. He blocked it off. Something was jamming the tranz lines. His worst fears came to him. Not only had the Followers of Zorl seized the ship, but whoever led the takeover -- Merin, he suspected -- had been well prepared. All the tranz circuits were jammed. Now they really were at his mercy.

He stopped at the intersection that opened to the control bubble. After a full minute's hesitation, Palmer ventured a careful glance at the bubble.

A depolarizer beam flashed barely past him. It ripped a chunk of wall across the intersection beyond him. The acrid smell of vaporized metal stung his nostrils. Palmer coughed, then gasped.

"The Federation will fall," Merin's near hysterical voice heckled down at him. Palmer dropped to the floor and crouched. The stinging smoke was still so thick that he could not see the entrance to the control bubble clearly. Good. That would provide *him* some cover. He marshaled his strength and leapt across the smoky ramp to the opposite side of the intersection.

Three blasts clumsily followed him, slicing the floor and breaching underlying conduits. Crackling cables sparked, hissing out more of the stinging smoke. A fourth shot hit the wall mere centimeters from Palmer's disappearing feet. He landed and rolled into a stand. He was safe, for the moment. Quickly, he headed below to the armory. The corridor lights flickered and dimmed. Was the ship losing power?

The weapon lockers had been fused shut by depolarizer fire. It could take hours, maybe days to cut through them and retrieve the firearms. Palmer cursed under his breath as he moved from locker to locker. It was the same with all of them, except one. It had been only hastily melted, appar-

ently with the hope that no one would bother to check past the first few lockers. Quickly, Palmer looked around for some kind of lever to use. A flattened pipe lay in the far corner of the room. Someone had probably dumped it there in the hurry of loading. Palmer grabbed it and forced its end into the door with a determination born of anger and desperation. After several minutes of concentrated, Kyrellian-focused effort, the door popped open.

Inside there were several heavy depolarizer pistols, but none had power cells. Palmer's hands and arms were sore. Perspiration poured down his forehead. He fought a stab of hopelessness. Immediately he squelched the unwanted outburst. Funny that something like *this* had the power to push him near tears. Clearing his head, he took a deep breath and carried two of the pistols below to the stores.

Feverishly, he began rummaging through cabinets marked POWER CELLS . . .

Merin stood primed for the slightest movement against him. His face was under lit from the glowing amulet he wore. It was a biotranz scrambler, given him by Goren's soldiers before they had dropped him at Ahrgol months earlier. His hand quivered, shaking now. He had never imagined that taking over the ship would terrify him so, but his resolve was set--he would take this ship or die in the effort.

Behind him the unattended guidance system flashed warning lights in unified cadence. The astrogator lay on the floor beside it--unconscious or dead. There was blood on his head where Merin and struck him. He would never forget the feel of striking a skull. It made him shiver. He had never imagined…

His eyes darted carefully about, trying to reassure his precarious advantage. "Pilot," he said, his voice near cracking. "You will no longer need to guide this ship."

With a gesture practiced over and over again while training under the Looting Combine's best technical men, Merin yanked a ROM wafer from the guidance panel and tossed it on the floor. Then, cautiously reaching inside his robe, he removed a *duplicate* wafer. Its leads showed that it was already burned, programmed and locked against tampering or removal. Merin shoved it in the port. Without even looking, he put his hand on the ENGAGE MANUAL OVERRIDE button and stubbed it.

The ferryship lurched momentarily and the stars disappeared. They were in hyperspace.

"You idiot!" Jenson yelled and started toward the guidance panel. Merin fired the depolarizer, exploding metal at his feet.

"Do *not* try anything like that again, pilot--or you will die. I have killed for Zorl before, and I will not hesitate again."

Jenson moved carefully back.

"Now, let us rest. We have a considerable journey ahead of us."

"You don't understand," Jenson urged. His voice shook from exhaustion. "You don't understand. We were still within the Ahrgol system--Hypermotility is still . . . we have no idea what would happen--what *will* happen if we jump into hyperspace under Hypermotility. When we come out, we might shatter, or collapse, or come out in the middle of a sun . . ."

"I know what I am doing, pilot!" Merin boasted. He had been well trained and drilled for this moment. He remembered how Goren's men had proven to him time and again exactly what *did* happen when jumping to hyperspace while still under Hypermotility. This they had learned from the numerous looting raids they had conducted on worlds abandoned to Hypermotility's ruin. The fer-

ryship would be safe.

"Now, to make certain that we arrive at our destination without interference, I fear I must do a little damage to your delicate instruments."

Carefully, Merin turned his depolarizer toward the panel. He pulled the trigger and traced a careful barrage of violet energy across its surface. The panel burst into flame and smoke.

Jenson thrust himself at the shaman, rage beyond life in his eyes. Merin turned quickly and shattered him in mid-flight with a burst of depolarizing energy. What was left of Jenson's body thudded to the ground, smoldering. The stench was sickening. The astonished expressions of the crew only mirrored that of Merin. He had lied about having killed others before. It nearly made him retch.

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self in a city."

Thealos nodded. "I'll meet you at the Foxtale then." Pulling his cloak over Jade-Shayler to hide the glint of Silvan steel, Thealos rested his hand over the hilt. As he joined the main road crowded with horses, carts, sailors, and merchants, Thealos felt the press of bodies. He turned to look back and Jaerod was gone. He craned his neck, trying to see him. Pin-pricks of gooseflesh danced on the back of his neck. He had the feeling he was being watched, but there was no sign of the Sleepwalker. Sighing with impatience, Thealos continued in the press of bodies toward the docks. Occasionally, a hand whisked on his clothes, but he kept a firm grip on his things and stayed along an open furrow on the rear side of the crowd.

There were other Shae within Sol. He hadn't really been looking for any, but their pale skin and light-colored hair was alarmingly obvious. He frowned. Some were obviously well-dressed moneylenders or barters attending to business. Others had lanky hair, cheap earrings, and thin beards. They shouted at everyone passing by, tempting them with deals on Silvan wine, palm-reading, some even hawking jewels from the Silverborne treasures. Thealos saw one juggle knives for a capful of coins. Kilshae, he remembered darkly. The banished ones. Over the years, how many had left Avisahn as he had? Did they miss wandering through acres of twisting oaks when the first green leaves were budding? Or did they miss the languid, peaceful lifestyle even more – the music, the flavors of wines and cheeses, the clear voices of a trained chorale? Many of the Shae he saw were filthy. There were other races as well. Stocky Drugaen longshoremen with wizened eyes and tangled beards shoved their way through the crowds. The Drugaen were a slave race that had thrown off their masters centuries ago. From what Thealos remembered, they were shorter because they had originally been bred to mine ore. They could be found doing hard labor throughout the world, only so long as they were paid for it. The best Sheven-Ingen blacksmiths were Drugaen-born, smiths who could hammer until the moon rose without tiring. The sights of Sol dazzled into his eyes all at once, and he secretly wished he were with Jaerod, to see the city as a Sleepwalker did.

Closer to the piers, Thealos found a tailor shop called The Silver Needle. He did not want to be recognized shopping in one of the Shae businesses that his Correl had dealings with. The owner was a large human woman with tight arms and long fingers. She gazed at him, watching his hands. He chose a thick pale green tunic sewn with silver-threaded trim and dotted across with studs, a heavy wool travel cloak that was ash gray, and he even found a padded leather vest lined with wool. He paused where the gloves were, tried on a few sets, and then put them back.

"You planning on paying for those clothes, Shaden?" the woman said from the counter. "Or are you just hoaxing me?"

Thealos turned to her. "Is my gold not welcome?"

She didn't flinch. "Just as long as you plan on leaving some of it here. It's not easy selling clothes that a Shaden touched."

Anger seeped into his cheeks, and he clenched the fabric of the cloak and tunic. He knew his clothes were bloodstained and shabby. He was accustomed to being treated deferentially as a barter's son. But it was obvious she didn't trust the Shae.

"I'll take these," he said, setting them down on the counter top.

She eyed him and then unfolded the cloak and shook it out. After examining the other clothes that way, a trick to be sure he hadn't bundled anything inside them, she propped her hand against her wide hip and said, "Five pieces."

"Of what?" he demanded.

"Gold," she answered firmly.

"You can't be serious," he said, feeling the barter's game begin. "The fabric isn't worth one piece, but I'll buy it for that. One Aralonian piece."

"One piece?" she laughed. "Get out of my shop. I sew each of these by hand with a silver needle. It's worth five, and that's all that I'll accept. If you don't like the prices, complain to the Silvan King."

"I could buy a new sword for five," Thealos countered. He raised the cuff on the tunic disdainfully. "If this were made by Silvan Weavers, I would pay five. Look how the hem is creased and stitched. Two lines of thread, not three. These barely meet the stitch-marking guidelines."

"How do you know about the…?"

"Or about the loose threads here along the hem," Thealos snapped icily. "It's fair work, Madame, but I know quality when I see it. And maybe I'm not an ignorant Shaden you can cheat." He reached in his money purse and laid two Aralonian pieces. They glimmered with a clean Avisahn mint. "They are worth one piece, but I'm in a hurry. It's two or nothing."

She hesitated, staring greedily down at the coins. It was obvious he could afford to pay, and that he knew the true value of the items. In the end, she accepted the gold Aralonian coins, and Thealos left after changing into the handsome tunic, cloak, and vest.

"Come back sometime, Shae Barter," she declared as he walked out. "Maybe we can talk some real business."

He gave her a mock bow and shut the door. The new clothes made him feel much better. What he needed was a warm bath and a laver full of soap cakes to cap it off. Pausing briefly, he asked a passerby about the Sheven-Ingen wharf and was given some vague directions taking him to the southeastern part of the city. Seagulls perched on the tall masts of ships and shrieked. Even though the roadway tilted slightly, the footing was good. Taverns and inns and warehouses jammed and crowded the Sheven-Ingen wharf, but it wasn't difficult finding the Foxtale Inn. It had wide windows that opened to a sprawling main room glowing with a huge hearth in the middle of it. The chimney was wide enough to fit a man across. It butted out of the tiled roof, sending plumes of gray smoke into the leaden sky. The inn wrapped around itself, with two aisles of rooms that met in the back with a second level perched on top.

Thealos studied it, inhaling the tangy salt smell from the ocean. That was the smell he remembered from Sol, not the filth by the gatehouse. Several wooden steps led up to the inn's foundation, and the stone was covered with wash marks from where the tide had risen suddenly and overrun the pier. Looking straight down the dock, Thealos could see the churning gray-blue waters at the end. A cool breeze blew through his hair. Thealos climbed the steps and entered. A blast of heat warmed his cheeks and hands, and he realized how cold it had been on the dock. The hearthfire roared with huge trunk-thick logs. He scanned the thirty or forty tables for a sign of Jaerod, but the Sleepwalker wasn't there yet. The owner leaned over on the bar counter, sifting through a stack of docket books. The man paused long enough to look up, scowl at Thealos, and then go back to counting figures. The room was barely half full, and there were plenty of open tables, so Thealos took a far corner table near the kitchen doors and dropped into a chair.

The inn smelled like beer and pipe smoke, but also of fresh bread and roasted geese. The wood-planked floor was surprisingly clean, and the patrons seemed to be enjoying themselves. There were dozens of little touches that made the inside of the Foxtale a warm and inviting place. Wainscoting, vine ivy, and fat tallow candles – all of which helped add to its charm. It was definitely a woman's touch – the innkeeper himself seemed out of place in it with his unkempt hair and rumpled sleeves. Setting his travel bundle and bow on an empty chair, Thealos sat and slowly scanned

the room. A Drugaen sat on a tall stool by the bar, clumsily shuffling a worn deck of cards. One of his boots tapped against the leg of the stool. He had a wicked double-bladed Sheven-Ingen axe in his belt and an iron-knobbed club in a hoop on his other hip. The club reminded Thealos of Cropper, and he shuddered with the memory. The Drugaen was young and a little ruddy, with reddish-brown hair and a combed beard. His chest was as big around as an ale barrel, and his stubby fingers tapped as they shuffled through the cards. He leaned over and whispered something to a serving girl.

The girl caught Thealos's eye and he stared at her. She smiled at what the Drugaen had said and shook her head, making her jewelry tinkle softly. Her hair was dark brown and long, and her blouse drooped lazily in front. She nudged the Drugaen with her elbow, said something, and they both laughed. Then she glanced over at Thealos, catching him in his stare, and gave him a smile that was friendly and very pretty. Thealos nodded back and continued scanning the room.

Along the far wall, near the rear corner of the inn, he saw a knight from Owen Draw. It was clear who he was from the scarred armor he wore. The knight pored over a thick platter of roast goose, dabbing gravy with a hunk of bread. He had rust-gold hair, long and loose – the Inland style. A mustache drooped down along each side of his mouth. Small crisscross scars knotted his cheek-bone and neck, everywhere the fine-chain mesh and silver plate didn't cover. His hands were bare, his gauntlets loose on the table next to him. Even his hands and fingers looked as if they'd been smashed and healed repeatedly. He looked like a care-worn hickory tree, solid and steady. Thealos watched him eat, wondering what the warrior from the Inland duchy of Owen Draw was doing down in the Shoreland.

The door opened, and a howling sounded as the warm air rushed out. Thealos looked towards the door and watched four hooded men enter the Foxtale Inn. They quickly took a table near the doors, hunching forward. One tossed off a hood, and Thealos saw his silver-blonde hair scooped and tied back – tied with a red-dyed leather thong. Thealos stared at another and saw the rough sailor's garb. But it was the red dye that made his stomach lurch. It was the color…

Thealos wanted to shrink in his seat as his stomach coiled with fear. Sweet Vannier, it wasn't possible! Four men – a quaere. And they weren't human either. He could sense it from across the room as if someone had whispered it right in his ear. No. They weren't human sailors in for a drink of ale.

They were Crimson Wolfsmen. And he didn't think it merely chance that they had entered the Foxtale behind him.

XIII

Dujahn pulled the reins back and eased the gelding into a light trot. Scratching the sweat-dampened skin behind his ear, he gazed at the picket fires ahead. Before reaching the south sentries, he dismounted and led the horse towards the flickering nests of light in the sharp darkness. His shirt was soaked, and sweat dripped down his ribs. The ground was spongy, moist and smelled like bitter weeds and mud. The vine maple and cedar crowded in on each other and in between the ruts grew thick patches of witch-thorn. His boots crunched over slick-beetles and crickets. Clouds of gnats and mosquitoes buzzed around him. The road was barely visible that night, but he studied the dimly-lit ruts and tracks and maneuvered without stumbling.

A Kiran Thall hooted like an owl, three low bursts from the wall of trees on his left. An alert call, Dujahn remembered from the training Miestri had given him. Just thinking about the Sorian made him shiver. She and Dairron had tricked him into serving them, letting him eavesdrop until he knew too much and now he had no choice but to forsake Folkes and work for them. Miestri had said exactly what would happen when he reached the picket lines and told him exactly what to do and say. She was well-informed about military affairs – she knew all the right things to say. Just as she had promised, the Kiran Thall had spotted him earlier than he thought they would. Impressive, but still not enough. If he hadn't wanted to be seen, he would have left the horse and started around the camp on foot as soon as the firelight was visible farther back.

An answering whistle replied in short crisp tones. Dujahn knew it meant he didn't appear threatening and that someone with a crossbow was tracking him closely. Maybe more than one. He continued forward, dragging the horse after him. From the south pickets, a detachment of sentries carrying torches approached. Their mail vests looked insufferably hot. None of them had drawn weapons yet. There wasn't a need to.

"Hold there, friend," the sentry captain announced warily. "Shine some light on him, Avison. I don't see a uniform."

The torches were raised, and Dujahn squinted as the light stabbed his eyes. He held the reins out so they could see his hands, and he took a step forward. "Good evening. My name is Dujahn of the Gray Legion. I'm here to see Commander Phollen."

"You're Gray Legion?" the sentry captain asked skeptically.

"Is Commander Phollen here?" Dujahn repeated. He looked to the right and left and studied the soldiers. They wore simple tunics and makeshift armor, not the black and gold of Bandit officers. Wearing drab brown and gray clothes himself, Dujahn looked more like a peddler. The sentry guards edged closer. They were scrutinizing him, as were the two or three Kiran Thall lurking in the trees. He stared at the sentries calmly, waiting for them to get over the fascination.

"What is the pass?" the sentry captain demanded.

"It's the name of Commander Phollen's ship…"

"And what is that?" the captain pressed.

"– the Khariidawn," Dujahn continued.

Three Kiran Thall appeared from the trees. Dark streaks painted their faces, making their mud-colored uniforms blend better. They were certainly more skilled than the soldiers in front of him. Each held a black-iron crossbow mounted on wooden stocks, but they raised them deferentially and nodded to him.

"If he's Gray Legion, escort him into camp."

Dujahn didn't recognize the Kiran Thall who had said it, but the soldiers obeyed him at once.

That was much better.

"Commander Phollen hasn't arrived yet," the sentry captain explained as they fell in around Dujahn, leading him into the warmth and firelight of the Shoreland Regiment. "We expect him soon. Our orders are to mobilize and be prepared to march on the fortress, but to wait until he gets back."

"Who is in command then?" Dujahn asked, handing a sentry the reins.

"Colonel Hallstoy."

"I need to see him immediately."

"Of course, we'll take you right there. Is there something the matter?"

Dujahn planted his hands on his hips. "Nothing I can discuss with you. Take me." He nodded to the ring of fires. Sentry soldiers were the same the world over, Dujahn thought. They were intimidating behind a picket line with twenty other soldiers pressing about them stupidly, but as soon as they realized you weren't impressed with their authority, they turned into sniveling weasels. The sentry captain ordered the rest of the watch to gather back at the pickets. Extending his arm, the captain pointed the way through the lines and started off at a brisk walk. The buzzing from the insects was drowned by the clank of pots and the hiss of campfires. Smears of mud and drying ruts made the ground uneven. Mashed bootprints were everywhere, marring the stone-cut road of the old Shae highway. The Shoreland Regiment hunkered across the only road through the Shadows Wood and stretched deep into the forest on each side. Dujahn shook his head, surprised that King don Rion hadn't heard about it yet – or sent one of his Dukes down with an army. His defense ministers deserved to have their eyes stabbed out. The Bandits wouldn't dare mobilize so close to the Inland! It's all a bunch of nonsense and frightened merchants trying to keep the roads clear for trade. He knew what they would be arguing. But they were wrong. So very wrong.

"As I said, we're expecting the Commander any day," the sentry huffed, dodging pit fires and mule carts. "Mage warned us to prepare to march, so we've broken camp and pulled onto the main road, to cut off any riders to or from the north. We're building scaling ladders and bringing in grapnels and knotted ropes…"

"You should post more sentries in the darkness farther south," Dujahn suggested. "The Kiran Thall spotted me too late because I was riding without a torch. I would hate for the governor of Landmoor to find out you're blocking the Iron Point Road."

"That's true, I guess," the sentry captain mumbled. "I'll take it up with Hallstoy. Say, are you working for Commander Phollen or Folkes, or was it General Dairron?"

"Who I work for is none of your business."

The captain gave him a wounded look and walked the rest of the way in silence. The bulk of the force was still on each side of the Shadows Wood, but the command staff had moved into the center where the road was flat and wide and the perimeter guard around it was defensible. But vulnerable, too. Dujahn shook his head and muttered an oath. Without a strong leader, a regiment could easily fall apart all by itself. He couldn't understand why Commander Phollen would try to organize a siege without being there to direct it. And here he was, Dujahn thought cynically, to help Miestri rattle the regiment and make it even more ungainly. That wouldn't be too difficult…

"There's Hallstoy's tent," the captain announced, pointing towards the command pavilion. It was ringed with Kiran Thall and officers, each dispatched with the evening orders. The smell of roasting boar and black-feathered jackdaw lingered in the stale air. It was muggy and fetid – Dujahn hated the Shoreland swamps. He was introduced to the chief officer on duty and then escorted into the pavilion where he could hear the Bandit colonel swearing.

"I don't care that he's a banned merchant! Take his cart, lock him in irons, and tell him to join the Bandit Rebellion. If he doesn't, let him wear the chains for a few days! Get out. How are the supply lines? Are we ready for the march? Good. It's banned time. Now what do you want, Bonner? Fetch me more ale."

Dujahn stepped past the tent curtain. It was stifling inside, and he tugged at his collar so he could breathe the air instead of swallow it. Hallstoy was just as tall as Commander Folkes, and he was built like a bear. A white scar went from his bottom lip down the side of his chin, and he had three more criss-crossing along his scalp where the hair had never grown back. Sweat glistened on his face, but he still wore the heavy chain tunic and black and gold-lined armor of the Rebellion. He argued with a colonel about where the Kiran Thall should tether their horses and muttered an obscenity. "And what do you want, Komsin?" he asked the duty officer, giving Dujahn a look of contempt. "Caught another merchant on the road? Did you hear what I told Captain Shokle? Arrest them all. They're fools, Sons of Fire, all of them! This is a war!"

"This is Dujahn," the duty officer announced, getting the colonel's attention. "He's Gray Legion."

Hallstoy's eyes narrowed and he grabbed a towering goblet of ale half a cask deep. Taking a long drink, he wiped his stubbled chin and squinted at the new arrival with more than a casual interest. "So you're Dujahn," Hallstoy breathed, obviously having recognized his name. That was flattering. "What does Folkes want?"

Dujahn shook his head and stepped forward. "Presently, I'm representing Miestri of Vale."

"You work for that tyke?" Halstoy smirked. "I don't envy you."

Dujahn shrugged. He leveled his gaze at the tall Bandit soldier. "In that case, you certainly won't like my news. She's coming to the Shoreland Regiment, Colonel. Tonight."

Hallstoy coughed as he tried to suppress a laugh. "Like Hate she is, Dujahn. This is Tsyrke's camp, and she has no right being here. And don't tell me she doesn't know that."

"You can tell her yourself when she gets here. I was sent to secure a pavilion for her and two companies of Kiran Thall."

Hallstoy's eyes went wild and he laughed out loud. "Sweet Achrolese, you were sent to do what?" The scar on his cheek burned. "You can't come into my army and start giving orders. I don't give a ban who sent you. Only Tsyrke or Mage or Stroth Ballinaire can make orders in this camp over mine. And in that order, too. I don't care if she's a Sorian – this isn't her camp!"

Dujahn shrugged. The half-smile he gave the colonel was forbearing. "The Sorian can do whatever they want, Colonel. Honestly, do you think you can stop her from coming here tonight? Do you think this entire army could stop her?" He gave the colonel a wry look. "Be reasonable. She's not here to take over your command."

"Then why is she coming?" Hallstoy demanded.

"She hasn't revealed that to me. I need a pavilion and a few companies of scouts. She asked specifically for Kiran Thall. That's all."

Hallstoy kicked one of the table legs, sloshing the ale. "No."

"What did you say?"

"I said no. I'm not giving her a thing. I will not let Tsyrke or Mage come back and find out I've been catering to her. You tell that…"

Dujahn reached inside his tunic pocket and withdrew a red-glass orb. A queer orange fire burned inside of it. The other Bandit officers stepped back, recognizing the shape and color of the orb. He heard one of them mutter something about dark magic.

"Why don't you tell her yourself?" Dujahn said coldly.

Hallstoy froze.

"Come, Colonel. Explain to the Lady of Vale why you won't greet a fellow member of the Rebellion. One who certainly has more authority over you or your officers. Go on, sir. Tell her."

"I don't have time for this," Hallstoy grumbled. He stared at the orb fearfully.

"I really don't think she cares," Dujahn advised. "The Lady of Vale is coming tonight. You know how they can be when they don't get their way." The orb gave off a wicked flash and a red mist began to creep from its shimmering glass. The other officers started to back towards the tent door. "She'll take your tent, Hallstoy. She'll be here in a minute if I invoke her."

The Bandit colonel gave Dujahn a deep frown and looked as if he was about to draw a weapon, but he tightened his mouth and shook his head. He looked ready to kill if they had been alone. "She's only daring this because Tsyrke and Mage aren't here," he whispered. "I only hope -- by Achrolese! -- that one of them returns before she can disappear." Hallstoy straightened his sword belt, summoned a spoonful of dignity, and looked towards one of his officers. "Tell Grimme to get out of his tent." He turned back to Dujahn. "It'll have to do. Secrist is out roving with two companies of Kiran Thall right now. She can use them when he gets back." He gave Dujahn a delighted smirk. "I would truly like to see her try and threaten him."

Secrist's companies? Dujahn thought dryly. "Thank you, Colonel," Dujahn said with a small bow. The red mist retreated back into the orb and he stuffed it back into the pouch. "The Lady of Vale will be pleased at your obedience." Without waiting for a response, he turned and followed the officer out of the stuffy pavilion. He was a little disappointed. Miestri had said she might have let him use the Firekin to rip the skin off of Hallstoy's skull. It would have been fascinating to see that – and to see the looks the other officers would have given him when he did.

Colonel Grimme went into a fury when he was dispossessed of his tent, but the order had been given, and not even he was brave enough to challenge a Sorian for it after Hallstoy had backed down. Dujahn stepped inside the musty tent. It reeked of sweat and ale. The fabric blotted out some of the noise and he stood quietly for a moment, feeling his entire body race with the heat. He had felt the power in the orb as he held it in his hand. He could have done anything with it! He wiped his forehead and paused, listening to the sounds of the camp rumble around him. Reaching into the pouch at his waist, he withdrew the fist-sized sphere again. The smoky orange light pulsed inside it, giving the orb a throbbing dull red glow. It was like staring into smoking coals, but the orb was cool. There were shapes in the mist, but she had warned him not to look at them. It was dangerous to do so. Dujahn looked away and set the orb on the tent floor. He backed away from it cautiously.

The flickering magic danced in the orb and the shapes began to take form. The reddish light grew brighter, yet darkening the tent as well as it covered his boots and hands and then the tent wall all around. The churn of magic came inside the pavilion, and Dujahn felt it grip and twist his stomach. It was like dancing on a hill during a lightning storm. A cool breeze came from the red-hot orb, and suddenly Dujahn found himself shivering.

There was a rustle of velvet robes and Miestri stood before him, holding the sphere in her palm. She smiled and raised her eyebrow, as if asking him why he was shaking. Two Shae appeared behind her, gripping their ash longbows. As the red light jumped back into the orb, Dujahn saw gorgeous woven rugs and dangling crystals within the tent. It smelled like cinnamon and sage. A soft bed with three pallets filled nearly the entire space, but there were also stone animals – ravens, sparrows, and vultures – and wooden puppets suspended from leather strands coming from the tent poles. He stared at the dangling ornaments, but recoiled when he saw the leering and tortured faces.

"Well done," Miestri said approvingly, slipping the ball-sized orb into her robes. "You handled Hallstoy well enough. If he had balked, you would have used the orb on him as I showed you?"

Dujahn bowed his head and stepped back, nodding. He'd killed men before. But never with magic. Never like that. Even though it was cold in the tent, he hadn't stopped sweating. "What else do you need me to do, my Lady?" He tried not to look in her eyes, but he found he couldn't help it. They were dark, almost black, and he couldn't distinguish her pupils. Swallowing was a word he felt described them best. It was like staring down a cliff at night.

She stepped closer, making the velvet robes rustle. "I want to know what is going on here, Dujahn," she whispered in her low musical voice. "Where is the Shoreland Commander? Where is Mage? When will they return? See what information you can gather and bring it to me at dawn."

"Of course," he answered and nodded. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes. Go find where the prisoners are kept. I want a young man, the youngest you can find. Bring him to me when you return."

He looked at her quizzically.

"Don't think, Dujahn," she warned. "Just bring him to me."

Dujahn felt something go black inside of him. Blinking, he thought for a moment he would faint. Stumbling, the Gray Legion spy left the tent, grateful for the soggy warmth that nestled into his armpits once he stepped outside. The buzz and the rumble of camp soothed him. There were men outside used to war and death and the thousand faces of pain in between. He understood them. He understood their motivations, fears, and desires. That was easy.

But Miestri of Vale? He shook his head, remembering what it felt like to be around her. Understanding a Sorian was like trying to understand what made the wind.

XIV

The only thing Thealos would have dreaded more was Elder Nordain walking into the Foxtale instead. He couldn't believe his bad luck. A Crimson Wolfsmen quaere! He knuckled his forehead, worry turning to panic inside his chest. There was no mistaking it. How long had they been following him? From the plains? Or had these been watching the streets of Sol for him to arrive? Desperation tore at him, making him want to bolt for the door. But they had already positioned themselves there. There was no escape that way.

Where are you, Jaerod? Thealos silently seethed, hiding his face in his hands. Hiding his face wouldn't help. If he could feel them, then they could certainly feel him. He risked a look across the tavern hall. They sat silently, waiting.

"In trouble with your friends?"

Thealos glanced up at the serving girl. He hadn't heard her approach the table. He swallowed. Looking into her eyes, he realized that worry shone on his face and she could tell.

She nodded imperceptibly, forestalling an answer. "I could send for the garrison. Or would that be even worse?" Her voice pitched low enough so that only he could hear.

Thealos watched the Wolfsmen over his knuckles. He shook his head, cursing his own foolishness. "Do you have a way out the back?"

"Yes," she nodded, holding a tray in front of her. "But the last thing you want right now is a dark alley where they can get you alone. Doesn't look like they mean any trouble right now. Probably waiting for you to leave." She offered a pretty smile. "I'm Ticastasy."

"Thealos," he replied, nodding. It helped to be talking to someone, though he knew she wouldn't be able to do anything to save him. Not even the knight from Owen Draw in the corner of the tavern could defeat four Crimson Wolfsmen. It would take a whole company of knights. He doubted even a Sleepwalker could match that many.

"Are you hungry? Why don't I get you a plate while you mull this over."

He nodded gratefully, but his stomach was wrenching. The serving girl put a hand on his shoulder and gave him a gentle squeeze. "How about some Silvan wine, too. You look like you need it even more." She gave him a wink and looked back at the bar towards the Drugaen. The earrings she wore gave off a musical sound as she motioned for him to join them.

The Drugaen stared at her, nodded, and hopped off the barstool. He was a big fellow, thick around the wrists with big meaty hands. Approaching the table, he tossed the worn deck of Bones on the table and gave Thealos a warm smile. "Hello."

"Flent, this is Thealos," the serving girl said, folding her arms over the plate. "Play a round of Bones with him while I fetch his dinner." She nodded towards the table with the Crimson Wolfsmen, and Flent winked and pursed his lips, some silent communication passing between them.

The din in the tavern was washed lower when the owner raised his voice. "Flent!" the bar owner howled. "What are wasting your time over there for? Fetch that grain bag from the stores like I told you to."

The Drugaen shrugged his shoulders and started tapping his boot on the leg of the chair. He gave Thealos a wizened look. "He'll forget I'm here in a minute. Nice to meet you, Thealos." He offered his big hand and gave Thealos a hearty shake. "My name's Flent Shago. You know how to play Bones?"

"I've never played," Thealos replied, watching as the serving girl approached the bar owner

and whispered something to him. Thealos then glanced back in the corner of the room at the knight. He was leaning back in his chair, watching Thealos intently. He sipped slowly from a large mug of ale. Thealos folded his hands on the table. "Why don't you show me."

Flent started flipping the cards clumsily. It was a trick, Thealos recognized. The large fumbling hands, the ignorant pretense. Jaerod had already warned him. But Thealos kept back his own smile. He'd never played Bones himself. But he'd watched enough games played out in Dos-Aralon to know the rules.

* * *

Thealos lathered some creamy butter on the rich slice of round bread. He took a few bites and set it down on the platter next to the stew. The Drugaen took a long sip from a mug of Spider Ale. He stared at the cards in his hands and then flipped over two, laying down a matching set.

Thealos nodded approvingly and flicked over an Aralonian piece. "Two shells in a row. You're pretty good at this."

The stocky Drugaen shrugged, finishing off the ale. "I play now and then. Mostly with sailors and Sheven-Ingen pirates." He patted the axe at his belt and gave Thealos a shrewd wink. "Did you come in down-river from Avisahn?"

Thealos nodded, taking another sip of Silvan wine. It came from the Radstill vineyards. A good name. Glancing over, he watched Ticastasy approach again with a fresh cup for Flent. Her jewelry tinkled softly as she sat down and joined them, sliding the mug over to her friend.

"Roye says no more games unless you're winning." She gave Thealos a playful grin and brushed the long dark hair over one ear. "I don't think your friends are planning to leave soon. It's dark outside now. Maybe Flent can help you sneak out back, unless a Shaden can see in the dark like a Drugaen can."

"I saw you over there talking to them," Thealos said cautiously, ignoring her suggestion.

She nodded. "They're definitely your race," she said, "Though they're trying to hide it. They have weapons. Like yours."

"Like mine?"

"The blade you're hiding in your cloak," she said, her gaze level with his. Her eyebrows arched. "Is that why they are after you? Did you steal it?"

Thealos shook his head slowly. "No, they want me, not my weapon." He rubbed his thumb along the lip of the wine cup. "I'm waiting for…a friend," he said delicately. "If you can get me out of here safely, I'll make it worth the trouble."

Flent nodded and shrugged without concern. "There are only four. We can handle it."

Thealos chuckled under his breath. "You have no idea who they are. One of them could turn that knight on his ear."

"I doubt that," the serving girl challenged, unimpressed. "He's a Knight of the Blade." Ticastasy looked at him probingly. "But if they're as good as you're boasting, Shaden, you must be pretty banned important. Who are you?"

Thealos clenched his fist, looking over Flent's shoulder at the Wolfsmen. "It would be better if you didn't know. You mentioned there was a way out through the back. Where does it go?"

She shook her head. "I have a better idea. It's dark out there tonight. You could get lost very easily and that wouldn't help your friend find you. Besides, what's to stop them from hurrying out the back after you? It might stall them longer if… they didn't believe you were leaving." She gave

him a knowing look. Her hand rested on his arm flirtingly and then teased the hair along his ear. "I don't want you to get the wrong idea, Thealos. Any number of girls down in the Wash would sell themselves for a drink of ale. But not here, not on these docks. And certainly not me. But do your friends over there know that?" She gave him a scrutinizing look. "You said you would make it worth my trouble. Flent can get a message to your friend when he comes. And I know plenty of places to hide you."

A patron coughed roughly at the table next to them and dropped a few coins on the table before lurching towards the door. The noise in the common room would have made it difficult for anyone to overhear them.

Thealos looked at her seriously. She was intelligent, for a human. He risked a look back at the Wolfsmen. If he made it away, what would they tell Nordain? That he'd been seduced by a serving girl in Sol? Nordain would believe it, and without any coaxing. But Thealos hadn't broken any of the Rules of Forbiddance since he left Avisahn. Without proof, what could Nordain really do? He looked into the serving girl's cinnamon-brown eyes. She was pretty, in a dusky way. An expensive gold pendant dangled down her throat.

"What will it cost me?" he hedged.

"Why don't you decide what it's worth to you? If you were a Silvan prince, the ransom would be generous. I think I'm your best choice right now," she pointed out. Her hand went lazily to his forehead, brushing his hair back. She gave him a flirting smile and then chewed on the corner of her mouth. "Come, my lord" she teased. "Who is your friend? What's his name?"

Thealos thought about it a moment longer and then quickly nodded. "I'm waiting for a Sleepwalker."

Her eyes widened with surprise. "A Sleepwalker?"

"Do you know how to recognize one?" Thealos pressed.

"Jaerod," Flent said suddenly, staring intently at Thealos. "He plays Bones with me. Sweet Hate, if you're with him, you must be a Silvan prince." He looked at Ticastasy and gave her a solid nod. "Find him a nice hideout, 'Stasy. I'll pretend to fix the door, just in case they try and get out the front to follow you. Wait 'til I'm there before you move." The Drugaen pushed away from the table. He rubbed his stubby knees and started clomping across the tavern.

"Flent!" the tavern keeper called over the ruckus. "Another keg of Spider Ale! The tap is running dry. Don't scowl at me…get down to the cellar!"

The Drugaen held up his pudgy hands and waved the tavern keeper away. He wandered towards the front door.

Ticastasy took Thealos' hand and started caressing it with her thumb. "Let me see. Where should I take you? I could hide you at the Thumber Inn down the wharf. Or there's a tavern on the Wash called Riverwink." Her smiles were dazzling and flirting, but the eyes were calm and serious. It was all show. She leaned forward and kissed the corner of his mouth. "Or you could stay in my room until Jaerod comes." She leaned back, giving him an amused smile. She licked her finger and wiped the dab of rouge from his mouth.

Thealos sat still, speechless for a moment. He'd never thought flirting could make him feel the effects of the wine so strongly. He was a little lightheaded and giddy. He decided to play along. Taking her hand in his, he kissed her knuckles deftly. "Do you offer that to all the Silvan princes you charm?" She smelled wonderful, like apples and mint.

A tiny gleam flashed in her eyes and was gone. "Only to green-eyed princes," she said, giving him a warm smile – a real one. "Not gray, not blue, not violet. Never trust a gray-eyed prince. But

you'd do better to be away from here. This city can swallow you if you're not wary. And I know it better than any lass around. Good, he's almost there. Come with me." Squeezing his hand, she started to tug him after her.

Flent had just reached the door when it burst open, letting out an angry rush of wind. Thealos glanced furtively, hoping it was Jaerod. Instead, a band of soldiers entered. Each had a crossbow slung over his shoulder, the wooden stock sloping and well-crafted. Their hair was long and swept back in the Inlander fashion. The uniforms were light riding gear, a mail shirt covered with a leather tunic and open at the sleeves.

"Mother of Hate," Ticastasy whispered darkly, looking at the newcomers. "They're Kiran Thall."

Thealos watched them enter, at least twenty strong. The mood in the Foxtale chilled. The leader was a tall, lanky soldier with a two-day growth on his cheeks. He had a hawk-nose and a long, hard face. He carried himself with arrogance, a self-possession making him seem younger. Swaggering in, he gave Flent a warning look to back off and marched over to the counter where the tavern keeper scowled.

"What can I do for you, Secrist? You don't stop by the wharves very often."

"My brother sent for me," the leader of the Kiran Thall snapped. "Said to meet him here in a few days. You seen him this side of the Ravenstone? Been to port yet?" He grabbed another patron's mug of Spider Ale and gulped it down. He slammed the cup and gave the tavern keeper a menacing look.

"Let's go," Thealos murmured. They were causing enough of a distraction to escape.

She shook her head, her eyes never leaving the leader. "They would see us. You don't want them to notice you. Not a Shae this far from Avisahn. Trust me."

"Who are they?"

"You've never heard of the Kiran Thall?" she asked incredulously.

Thealos shrugged, angry at the delay. "They're a bane in the western half of the valley. They don't frequently stop in my kingdom. They look like Inlanders."

She nodded. "They're the cavalry of the Bandit Rebellion," she replied evenly. "Part of the Shoreland Regiment. Arrogant mules, all of them. That one is a colonel. Secrist Phollen." She looked at him with contempt. "Hate," she muttered again softly, watching the tavernkeeper, trying to get his eyes.

"Why doesn't the garrison arrest them?" Thealos demanded in a whisper. "Doesn't this city hold for to Dos-Aralon?"

"You're in the Shoreland now. Sol is a port city. If the governor of Sol stopped trading with …"

"Secrist, over there!" one of the Kiran Thall called derisively. Thealos froze, clenching the girl's hand.

But they were looking at the knight from Owen Draw who had slowly come to his feet. The look the knight gave them was so fierce that Thealos knew there would be violence. The leader of the Kiran Thall pushed away from the counter and started forward. An amused smirk crossed his bristled mouth. Several followed him, while others kept the door secure. The knight stood motionless, staring coldly at the soldiers approaching him. He unfolded his arms, setting a clove-pipe on his plate.

"You're a long, long ride from Owen Draw, you armored bastard," Secrist sneered.

"Are you so anxious to see a gallows, coward?" the knight rebuffed. He looked at the twenty

soldiers, sizing them up.

A mirthless chuckle came as the reply. Secrist glanced up at the rafters. "Well, this looks like it could do for one well enough in a pinch. Hang you like I did those fool knights who tried to route us in Iniva. They call it Blackwater now."

"We've all heard of it, boy. I arrest you for high treason in the king's name." He unsheathed a two-handed blade from a battered scabbard. "I arrest you for rebellion against your true king."

"Trobbe, fetch me a rope from my saddle bags," Secrist ordered, nonplussed by the knight's words. "I feel like hanging another knight."

"Secrist," the tavern keeper warned, "I…I can have some casks of ale ready for you right quick. Fetch 'em, Flent. Quickly, lad, fetch 'em! Won't cost you a thing. Come on, there's plenty. Don't kill him. Not here. This will ruin me…"

The knight stood unflinching. "You fetch that rope, little boy." He shook his head slowly. "But I just may use it on you."

Thealos' mouth went dry. He stared at the leader of the Kiran Thall, feeling nothing but contempt for the man. He glanced around the room, counting them. The Kiran Thall had crossbows and light weapons. But there were at least twenty, and he didn't know how many more outside. The other patrons of the tavern bowed their heads down, not daring to look up. They outnumbered the Bandit horsemen, but only in numbers, not courage.

"I can't believe this," Ticastasy muttered darkly. She let go of his hand. "I'm calling the garrison here."

"No," Thealos warned, but it was too late.

"You're not going to hang anyone tonight, Secrist Phollen, so quit blustering," the serving girl said, stepping away from Thealos's table. "You gamble with Fate every time you come to Sol. This is my tavern as much as it is Roye's. We've earned this place. But if you hang a Knight of the Blade, you're a bigger fool than I ever thought. And I think you're a banned big one."

Secrist turned and gave her an appreciating glare. His eyes went up her body, lingering at the soft curves. He wiped his mouth on a gloved hand and clucked his tongue. She stared at him defiantly, hands on her hips.

"Sporting with Shaden now, 'Stasy?" he jibed, giving a half-glance at Thealos. "I'm sure Tsyrke would love to hear that."

Thealos' eyes burned with anger.

"And you think he'd approve of what you're doing?" she snapped. "You could spend a month in the River Cellars for a bloody nose, and he would let you rot. But killing a knight in my tavern – that'll earn you the gallows. And he'd hand over the rope. You'd better get out of here, Secrist. Before I call the garrison."

Secrist's eyes glimmered with fire. "And how are you going to call them?" he challenged. He looked around the room. "You gonna send that pudgy Druge?" He stepped towards her, his finger stabbing the air. "Call them. But you know they won't lift a finger. Not even if I hang that banned knight higher than cedar. When Ballinaire rules Sol, they'll be wearing the black and gold. Now be a good lass and fetch me a drink." She stood there, glaring at him. She didn't move. "I said fetch me a drink!" he roared.

Thealos reached down and rested his hand on the pommel of his Silvan blade. He watched her carefully, wondering how stubborn she was. If she would obey him.

Ticastasy took Flent's ale cup from Thealos' table and walked up to the Kiran Thall slowly. She looked him right in the eye. And splashed it in his face.

XV

For a moment, Secrist stared at her in disbelief as ale dribbled down his chin. His anger was sharp and quick. "You little whore…" he snorted, backhanding Ticastasy. She crumpled to the floor. Anger shot through Thealos, fierce and hot. Some of the patrons made a dash for the doors. Flent Shago thundered a blistering oath as he yanked the knobbed club out of his belt. He swung wildly at a soldier near him, dropping him with a shattering blow across the knees. The Drugaen howled, his gray-green eyes blazing as he rushed towards Secrist.

The knight didn't waste a moment. He also charged Secrist with his double-handed sword. Fighting erupted through the room as the Kiran Thall rushed the knight and the Drugaen. Other patrons of the tavern yelped with fear, ducking beneath tables to try and get out of the way, but some were trampled as the Bandit soldiers attacked. Two against twenty.

Thealos shoved his chair back, whipping his cloak out of the way as he grabbed the hilt of the Silvan blade. When he drew it, he felt the magic flare to life, sending a jolt of shock up his arm. The wash of magic rose through him as it had when he found the blade. It glowed a cool blue in the tavern hall.

Flent went down in the rumble, pinned and hammered from behind by three soldiers. The knight faced off against three others who feinted and lunged to get a blow in at him. He held them off with tight sweeps of the blade, giving ground slowly. The Kiran Thall attackers smirked wickedly, teasing their prey. It was only a matter of time before they had him.

"Fine weapon, Shaden," a soldier challenged, motioning a second soldier to come with him. "Should have hid under the table like the others. I'll take that blade and any gold you have on you. Now!"

Thealos watched the two Kiran Thall approach his table, weapons drawn. There were too many. He closed his eyes and fed the weapon's magic with his need. The feeling was there, a cool watery pleasure wrapping him in its arms. Silvan magic. The blade went from cool blue to white hot. Yet it was like cupping frigid seawater in his hands. When he opened his eyes, he saw the soldiers hesitate. He knew they could see his eyes glowing.

"If you think I'll be as easy to knock down as a serving girl," Thealos said acidly, "You've been riding those flea-bitten nags too long."

Thealos had to be quick. Standing off against trained soldiers was a fool's mistake – he'd learned that with Tannon's Band. He hadn't the skill or training to last long against them. But he was quick and unpredictable and hoped that would be enough to throw them off.

"Afraid of a lone Shaden?" Thealos taunted. "Maybe it's the Kiran Thall who wear silk socks and dance in the woods. Does your lady friend Secrist there ever let you lead?"

"Bloody rake, I get him first!"

Thealos lunged forward, slashing the Silvan blade at the soldier on his left, catching him by surprise.

The man saw the wicked glow of the blade and staggered back to avoid it. It gave Thealos just enough time to dart past them between another set of tables. He had to leap over a patron crawling away and duck around another table to where several Kiran Thall were kicking Flent. None of them saw him coming. The Silvan blade shrieked with magic, cutting through the tunic and mail and gashing a Bandit soldier's back. Swinging again, he cut another man in the side, watching with sick pleasure as the leaf-blade split him open. He felt the soldiers coming in behind him and

whirled to face them, holding his weapon defensively. Flent lumbered to his feet with a roar, bleeding from his nose and mouth. He hefted his Sheven-Ingen axe in both hands.

"The magic," one of the soldiers whispered. "It's mine." It was just like Tannon's Band. They saw the blade and they craved it more than feared it.

Thealos tried to get control of it, tried to tame the bursts of delight that danced inside him. He couldn't. The blade was alive – a needing thing.

A dark-bearded soldier lunged for the weapon, trying to topple Thealos with his size. Thealos darted right and the blade seemed to slice on its own accord, scoring through the chain shirt like an axe biting into bark. It felt a little like borrowing someone else's reflexes. The soldier howled with pain as the blood gushed from his side. Another movement, and Thealos met it, snapping the long sword thrust at him like brittle glass and kicked the man down. The Silvan magic roared through him, hot and icy at once. There were Kiran Thall everywhere, coming at them from all sides. Flent swung the axe furiously, trying to keep them from Thealos' back.

"Too many!" the Drugaen huffed, swinging his axe desperately. "Where's the banned garrison!"

Behind the mob of panicking patrons and Bandit soldiers, the air filled with the battle yells of the Crimson Wolfsmen. Four other gleaming short swords joined the fray, cutting through the ranks of the Kiran Thall. Toward Thealos. There were too many people, hardly enough room to avoid getting hit.

"The Shaden! Kill the bloody Shaden! Kill them all!"

Flent lost his footing in the slick blood-stained floor and went down. The Kiran Thall swarmed him, their tapered blades thrusting down at him. Thealos was alone.

Then the knight shoved Secrist through the huge window, shattering it, and the fight spilled into the streets.

* * *

The blow caught Thealos unprepared. Dark spots danced in his eyes, making it difficult to distinguish between enemies. His lip was bleeding from the stray punch, and he felt the sword gash into his side. He managed to flop to the floor as the soldier swept the sword down, trying to cleave his head in half. He tried twice to strike the soldier, but the man was too well trained. Thealos looked back at the window and tried to scramble towards it to escape into the street. He saw others taking advantage of the exit and fleeing into the side alleys.

"Give it to me, Shaden!" the soldier snarled, dislodging his weapon from the smashed wooden table and charged at him again. Thealos was dizzy with pain and fatigue, but he'd managed to keep himself away from the mob of Kiran Thall who had turned to fight the Wolfsmen. His arm went quickly numb from the shock of the blows. The blade of Jade-Shayler held the attacker off, but the weapon's magic couldn't match the skill of his foe. Thealos' rolled quickly sideways to avoid another stroke and hurried back to his feet.

Quickly, Thealos ducked away, trying to get out of the man's reach. He was almost to the window. But the soldier's lust for the magic drove him after Thealos relentlessly. "Give it to me! Ban you, Shaden! It's mine!"

A deathscream cut into the tavern and stabbed Thealos' ears and eyes like knives. The blade in his hand flared brighter than a torch, consuming him in a sheet of pulsing blue flame. The scream echoed in Thealos' mind, and the smell of death stung his nose. A Shae's death. For an

instant, he felt death's kiss on his cheeks, then everything in motion stopped under a cracking of rich thunder. It wasn't thunder from a storm – it came from across the tavern and filled the leaf-blade in Thealos' hand. One of the Crimson Wolfsmen was dead. He couldn't see the body, but he felt the man's final gasp of pain. The blade had reacted to it like lightning, encasing Thealos in a ball of glaring light. Thealos stood helpless for a moment, feeling the strength of the magic intensify. It wasn't earth magic – he'd felt that many times. It was different, stronger, more frenzied. Images of the Wolfsman's life whipped past him, bonding him to the sword, to the memories. It was stronger than anything he had felt in his life. A bond. A communion with the dead. For an instant, all of the Shae in the tavern were one, Thealos with them. He could see things through their eyes and they could see through his.

When the shock of thunder was spent, the whirlwind of the tavern resumed.

The Kiran Thall stumbled away from Thealos, covering his eyes from the glare of the sword. Thealos could see the other Wolfsmen attackers in his mind even though they were still surrounded by enemies. They were just as aware of him as he was of them and charged forward, eager for the kill, whipping through the crowds of soldiers with lethal efficiency. There was no way they were going to let him escape. He was their charge, their mission. The Council of Elders in Avisahn wanted him in prison.

Thealos knew he had to leave. The Kiran Thall were strong, but the Wolfsmen were stronger now; the bond with their fallen comrade had renewed them. Thealos felt a pull, a windstorm against his back, an energy he'd never experienced. The soldier's eyes in front of him widened with shock as Thealos met him stroke for stroke, inch for inch. It was as if he'd handled the leaf-blade all his life. It was part of him now. Thealos cut the man once, twice, slashing his armor open. Thealos pressed towards him, hungry for the kill. He couldn't stop himself. He didn't want to.

"The garrison!" someone shouted. "The garrison is coming!"

As the soldier turned to look, Thealos had him, driving the short blade all the way through, burying it to the hilt. Warm blood splashed on Thealos' hand as he jerked the sword up and out, letting the soldier crumple to the floor. He stared down at the body and then looked up.

The leader of the Wolfsman quaere was staring at him in fury. He could hear the man's thoughts. That weapon doesn't belong to you!

Thealos ran to the window and vaulted outside, cutting his hand on a shard of jagged glass on the sill. He knew he was bleeding, but he barely felt it. If the Wolfsmen caught him, it was all over. His encounter with Tannon, this fight in the Foxtale – for nothing. They were distractions from his real goal. He had to get to Landmoor.

The sea wind on the pier whipped fiercely at Thealos' clothes. He saw the garrison jogging down the street, armor and weapons jangling. The Kiran Thall were making for their horses, falling one after another to the knight who defied them all. He cut them from their horses, spilling their bodies into the street. Hearing the stamp of hooves, Thealos turned and saw the charging gelding, almost too late. Thealos was hit from behind, shouldered roughly by the horse.

As he lay on his back in the street, just beyond the reach of Secrist's sword tip, he knew he had come very close to dying. The horse loomed over him menacingly, its foul breath snorting puffs of steam in the night air.

Secrist's eyes met his coldly. "You're dead, Shaden," he spat, giving him a look of hatred. "No matter where you hide!" Whistling, Secrist called the other Kiran Thall to ride and jerked the reins roughly, galloping into the night-filled streets. "Ride! Ride!"

Thealos got to his feet quickly. He wanted to chase the man. He wanted to go after him and

cut him down with all the others. The magic burned furiously inside him. He could still see through the eyes of the other Wolfsmen. Then he saw himself in their eyes. Turning quickly, he faced off as the leader of the Crimson Wolfsman emerged from the window. Holding the blade of Jade-Shayler before him protectively, Thealos backed into the alley near the inn. Wrapped in the thick night shadows, he retreated from the commotion of the inn-room brawl.

A moment later the Wolfsman leader was there. His eyes were flinty and blue, like a mountain framed against the sky. He joined Thealos in the darkness of the alley. Even in the dark, even at night, Thealos could feel the other Shae's presence.

"Thealos Quickfellow," the Wolfsman said angrily in Silvan. "I am Xenon, Watcher Lor of Sol. You are under arrest by the Shae Council of Elders for high treason. You will come with me and stand trial before the Sunedrion."

"I have not been charged with treason," Thealos countered in Silvan, backing away, keeping his distance. He felt the magic in his arm, but something was not right. It was quickly retreating back into the blade. Abandoning him to the wind and the pain at his side and hand.

"You defile that weapon by touching it!" the Lor snarled. "You are not a Crimson Wolfsman. You were not trained in the magic. You are nothing but an unskilled barter. A boy. Now set that blade down, or I'll make you."

"No," Thealos replied, shaking his head. He backed slowly towards an alley. "I can't go back with you. Not now. There is danger for the Shae, I must…"

"You have no choice, Quickfellow. This is not something you can run from anymore. You will answer for your crime, for the most serious of crimes! I have no respect for Kilshae, and oathbreakers are the worst. You are a craven and a rebel. Stand and face your crimes, boy. You've run far enough!"

Thealos felt a prick of awareness on the back of his neck. A whisper that someone was there, just behind him.

"I don't see him running from you, son of Keasorn," Jaerod said in perfect Silvan. His black cloak rustled softly. "He chose to leave Avisahn. He chooses what he must."

The Crimson Wolfsman studied the Sleepwalker for a moment. An instant. Then he came at Jaerod like a whirlwind.

Jaerod shoved Thealos aside, a hard blow that sent him off his feet and onto the cobblestones. Thealos twisted around, his shoulder throbbing, and watched the Sleepwalker evade the Wolfsman's blows.

Xenon was a trained Lor. He had been training since before Thealos had learned to read, and probably before Jaerod was even born. The short blade whipped around in dizzying strokes, slicing and stabbing at the black-clothed human. There was a frenzied haste to it, a hunger to kill so deep that Thealos recognized it in his eyes. The human would fall quickly. He was no match for the skill and training of a…

Xenon went over backwards, flipping, landing hard on his back. The Wolfsman blinked, stunned, and was on his feet instantly, slashing out again. The Sleepwalker waited for him. Jaerod moved like tidewater, his hands out and away from his body, his feet mercurial as he shifted his stances to avoid the hail of blows. He moved subtly, deftly, just enough so that the weapon passed harmlessly by him. The cloak followed his movements, snapping at the wind. Xenon struck again and again. He missed every time. In a quick reach, Jaerod caught the Wolfsman's arm, locking it painfully at the elbow and hurled him into the wall of the Foxtale. He struck it hard. Blood dribbled from a cut at the warrior's temple. Xenon didn't flinch, but flung himself at the black shadow, high

low – high again. Every move and technique meant to bring his opponent down.

"Jaerod, behind you!" Thealos warned as the second Wolfsman joined the attack, coming out from beneath a dark awning into the alley.

The Sleepwalker didn't falter. He zigzagged around Xenon and put himself between them and Thealos. He faced two now, weaponless, his hands slightly apart as he studied them. Both came at him with a howl of fury and went down in a heap as the Sleepwalker ducked down, swept one down with a clip at the ankle and rose again, striking his palm under the other's chin. Xenon gasped with the jolt and reeled backwards, clutching his neck and struggling to stay conscious. Twisting sideways, Jaerod dropped down, hammering the flat of his hand against the other's neck. The Shae blacked out and slumped in the street.

The Sleepwalker rose slowly, his eyes never leaving the injured Lor. Xenon was panting, clutching his throat and wheezing with pain. "The garrison," Jaerod reminded Xenon pointedly. The advancing soldiers had filled the street outside the Foxtale. It was only a matter of time before they flooded the alleys too. "The Shae queen would be furious to know that Crimson Wolfsmen were involved in a ravinjon in Sol tonight."

Xenon glared at Jaerod. He also replied in the king's common. "Then we will meet again, human. And when we do, you will die."

"All die in the gods due time," the Sleepwalker replied calmly. "And only then."

Thealos stared in amazement as the Crimson Wolfsman Lor heaved his unconscious comrade over his shoulder and stole deeper into the shadows before the first ranks of the Sol garrison reached them. Thealos looked at Jaerod, rubbing his throbbing shoulder.

The long sword dangled from the Sleepwalker's hip still enfolded in the slender leather sheath. Untouched.

* * *

The Foxtale was in shambles. Broken tables and smashed chairs littered the main hall. Posts that supported the ceiling were splintered and the cross-beams sagged. Blood and ale lay in puddles on the floor. Many of the patrons had been trampled or stabbed by the Kiran Thall attack. The dead were brought out to the wharves by the city soldiers, lined up, and covered with blankets to be taken to the garrison coroner. But those who had started the encounter had paid the heaviest toll. Barely half of the Kiran Thall had escaped with their lives. The tavern keeper, Roye, was furious and surly as he complained in guttural harshness to the captain of the damage that was done. Thealos watched them from a chair, tenderly massaging his shoulder. The cut on his side had stopped bleeding.

"If you were going to start a fight on this side of the river," Jaerod scolded softly, feeling the bone of Thealos's shoulder. "You should have waited for me to get here first." He took Thealos' arm and bent it, testing the soundness.

"But I didn't…" Thealos stammered and realized the Sleepwalker was only teasing him. His grey eyes glinted with amusement. He groaned as Jaerod popped his shoulder back into place. It hurt like fire, but at least he was alive. "I thought those Wolfsman were going to take me back to Nordain. Thank Vannier you came when you did."

Jaerod nodded and rose, observing the damages. "You can thank him when you say your prayers tonight. Tell me what happened," he demanded, pulling out the damp bag of Everoot.

Thealos related the experience as quickly as he could, mentioning the Crimson Wolfsmen

watchers and how the Kiran Thall had provoked the fight by wanting to hang the knight. Jaerod's eyes darkened and he nodded, listening intently. He withdrew a bit of Everoot and pressed it into Thealos hand. The Silvan magic wrapped him in its warmth, healing the cut on his side and the gash on his hand, leaving him complete and whole once more. The feelings washed over him in warm waves, soothing and soft

"Fury, but that feels good," Thealos sighed, staring at the vibrant moss in his hand.

"I need to speak to the garrison captain so we can leave. Wait for me." The Sleepwalker approached the tavern keeper and the soldiers and began talking to them.

Thealos lowered his fist, savoring the dregs of the magic. He quickly looked around the room and saw Ticastasy tending the fallen Drugaen. The serving girl pressed a bloodied rag against his barrel chest in an effort to stanch the bleeding. Flent's face was paler than sapwax, and his breathing came in ragged gasps. Thealos was sickened at the sight. The soldiers had hacked him even after he'd fallen. He lay in a puddle of blood.

"How is he?" Thealos said softly, coming up behind the girl and squatting low next to her.

"Thirsty," the stocky Drugaen replied with a broken grin. He grit his teeth with pain. "'Stasy thinks… if I drink anything, it'll come spilling out on my shirt." He seized up in a cough and blood dribbled down his lip. "But I'd rather leak ale…than blood."

"Sshhhh," the serving girl muttered, putting a fresh cloth on his chest. "I sent Norrie running for a Zerite, Flent. He'll help you, just stay awake. Please, just stay awake a little longer!"

Thealos stared down at the Drugaen. He was in agony. How he'd survived the battle at all, Thealos didn't know. He wondered if he had looked this bad when Jaerod found him in the gully. His heart panged at the thought. "Let me help him."

The serving girl looked at him with a surge of hope. "Are you a healer?"

"My people are," he acknowledged. He looked down at Flent and then at the girl. Opening his hand, he showed them the stump of Everoot that had just healed him.

"What is that?" she asked, staring at it warily.

The Drugaen looked past Thealos, as if seeing something behind him. His eyes glazed over and his head drooped low on his chest. He was fighting to keep his eyes open.

"Flent!" she gasped, clutching his shirt front and shaking him. "Don't you give up on me. Stay with me!" Her eyes brimmed with tears.

With the Everoot in his hand, Thealos pulled the bloody cloth away and pressed the vibrant moss against the deep gash. He felt the magic surge, rush from the plant into the Drugaen's limp body. The earth magic spread slowly from his hand. It wasn't the same reaction as when Jaerod had used the plant on him. It was weaker now, not as refreshed, but the results were the same. Flent gasped once, twice, his chest heaving – eyes wide.

"What…what are you doing?" the serving girl demanded, alarmed.

"Don't fight it," Thealos soothed. "It's all right."

Color returned to Flent's bloodless cheeks. His hand filled with strength as he gripped Ticastasy's arm, squeezing it so hard she winced. Her eyes widened with shock. His chest rose and fell, long and slow. A timid grin spread over his mouth. The bloodstained clothes were still there. But when Thealos lifted his hand, the gaping wound on his chest was gone. And so was the clump of Everoot.

"Thank Achrolese!" she whispered in surprise. "Thank Achrolese, you saved him!" She squeezed Thealos' hands fiercely. "Thank you, my lord. Thank you!"

Thealos' shoulders sagged with relief and he couldn't help but smile. He'd never saved some-

one's life before. With all the death that night, it felt wonderful.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, "What a wretch – I've got blood all over you!" Grabbing a fresh towel, she cleaned his hands for him.

Flent sat up slowly, letting out a deep sigh, and looked at his bloodstained clothes. Ticastasy tossed down the towel, looked at the Drugaen sternly, and then wrapped her arms around his neck. "Don't you ever do that again!" she said, half-choked with tears.

He smoothed her hair tenderly. "I've never let any man hit you, 'Stasy." His eyes narrowed angrily. "If he comes back to Sol again, I'll split him nose to navel. I swear it."

She shook her head sadly. "I didn't know what else to do, Flent."

Thealos looked at her with a frown, remembering. "You provoked him. Deliberately. Why?"

Her eyes flashed defiantly. "So I could slip into the kitchens and send the cooks running for the garrison. I don't need to answer to you…"

Thealos touched her arm to calm her. "I'm glad you did. You surprised me, that's all. You knew that Kiran Thall?"

"Knew of him," she replied warily. "His brother is a merchant captain with the League of Ilvaren. I've known that. But Secrist is reckless. Ban him, trying to hang a knight from Owen Draw in the Foxtale. What in Pitan was he thinking!" She looked up at Thealos and flushed. "I'm sorry for my language. I do that when I lose my temper."

Thealos smiled. "I have that problem myself. I've said worse, and recently." He liked Flent and Ticastasy. They had both come to his aid when he was. He owed them something for their trouble. "Neither of you are safe here." He glanced down at Flent, who nodded, listening to him carefully. "The Kiran Thall will probably come back. So will the men who were here for me."

He felt a prick at the back of his neck, but he saw Jaerod's reflection in the serving girl's cinnamon-brown eyes. The Sleepwalker was standing behind him.

"He's right," Jaerod said softly, looking down at the two. "It will be dangerous for both of you to stay here. Especially you, Drugaen."

"Why?" Flent demanded, eyes cautious yet curious.

Thealos smiled. He put his hand on Ticastasy's shoulder. "You were willing to guide me to shelter. Let us do the same for you. Do you know a place where they can stay, Jaerod?"

Her brown eyes looked into Thealos' seriously. "Who are you, my lord?"

"They'll come with us," the Sleepwalker said simply.

The serving girl wiped her eyes on her blouse and shook her head. "I'm not afraid of Secrist or the Kiran Thall. We'll have watchmen looking for them. And they'll all spend a fortnight in the River Cellars if they ever ride into Sol again."

"You must come with us," Jaerod insisted softly.

"This…this is our home, Sleepwalker," she hedged. "Roye depends on us. He can't run the Foxtale by himself. Flent, tell them!"

Flent was staring at Jaerod. "It's dangerous because of the magic. Isn't it? The magic that healed me."

Jaerod nodded. "You are not safe here. Come with us."

"Flent! I can't believe you're considering this! We don't know who they are!"

The stubby Drugaen rose to his feet and slid the Sheven-Ingen axe in his belt hoop. He looked into her frantic eyes. "I should be lying here dead on the floor, 'Stasy." He waved his hand at the mess of blood on his shirt. The inn was rank-smelling as the serving girls brought out floor brushes and mops. "We leave tonight?" Flent asked Jaerod, and the Sleepwalker nodded.

"I won't let you go alone!" she seethed.

He gave her a frown. "Then grab some clothes, girl. Get moving."

The serving girl muttered darkly under her breath and finally nodded, standing and folding her arms tightly. "All right. But at least tell us where."

"Landmoor," Jaerod said, staring back across the tavern at something. A small smile flickered on his mouth.

Across the ramshackle tavern, the knight from Owen Draw slowly bound a wound he had earned in the fight with the Kiran Thall. He was watching them closely.

XVI

Thealos and his companions huddled around a small fire in a grove of elm near the Valairus shore. It was well after midnight. Fog swirled thickly around the sheltering trees, chilling their cheeks with salty wetness. The fire snapped miserably, its tiny flames whipped by the bone-cold gusts from the sea. Thealos pulled the new cloak tighter around his throat, keeping the hood from blowing off.

Flent Shago leaned against a stump of driftwood, munching on a handful of chickpeas. The cold didn't appear to be bothering him at all. He had a big travel sack next to him in the sand and grass, and a small round cask propped up his arm. He'd changed the bloody tatters for a fresh shirt and pants, a huge leather belt and buckle, and some sturdy walking boots. On his hip, he carried the double-bladed axe. He had boasted to Thealos earlier that he'd won it in a game of Bones from a Sheven-Ingen sailor. Ticastasy nestled close to the Drugaen, sharing his warmth. Thealos barely recognized her. Gone were the cheap tinkling bracelets and frilly green skirt he had seen her in earlier. She wore traveling clothes – sturdy brown pants with boots and a light loose cotton-twined shirt. A thick cloak with a wide hood draped along her back, and her dark hair was tied back with a colorful violet band. He noticed a thin knife in her belt. She shivered as the wind battered them again and stared into the fire, lost in her thoughts.

Thealos looked across the fire at Jaerod. The Sleepwalker crouched before the logs, prodding them with a stick as if to coax more warmth from them. The crash of the ocean waves on the shore was followed by a steady hiss as the tide retreated. The sound was comforting and brought back memories of his visits to Jan Lee with Correl.

"How many times have you been out to sea?" Jaerod asked Thealos over the dying firelight.

Thealos shook his head and folded his arms, shivering. "I was just thinking of that. I've never been to the East Kingdoms, but I plan to someday. Jan-Lee is pretty…and warmer. This fog is cold enough to freeze wine."

Jaerod smiled. "Oh, this is mild. Try crossing the Ravenstone during a blizzard."

"Cold is cold, Sleepwalker," Flent muttered sleepily, patting Ticastasy's arm with his meaty hand. She snuggled closer to him. "I was born in the Ravenstone but you get used to it, I guess." He wiped his nose on his sleeve. "This doesn't bother me much. But I'm never going back to those mountains."

"Why not?" Thealos asked. "Isn't that your homeland?"

"Nope. Sol is. During all those banned wars with the banned Krag in the Ravenstone, my parents died of tide fever. I wanted to fight, but they said I was too young so they sent me to an orphanage in Astillon. I hardly remember what it was like any more. But I do remember it was cold."

"Astillon is pretty country though," Thealos said. "I like the highlands. Spruce and red-pine groves and fields of mustard clover."

Flent shrugged, not impressed. "You're talking about the scenery. It's not easy being the only Drugaen at an orphanage. Too young to fight in the wars, they said. Hah! Had plenty of fights at the orphanage. Nobody left to look after me." He gave Thealos a low smile. "Quite a few of your people there. The outcast ones – the Kilshae. Some of 'em, anyway. No one ever came back for me. You know, to bring me back to the Drugaen Nation." He chuckled mirthlessly. "So when I was old enough, I left and went as far from the mountains as I could walk. I love the sea." He smiled at the

hiss of foam receding off the shores. "Ahhh, that's music."

"I can't believe we've known each other that long, Flent," Ticastasy smiled, jostling his leg. "What, eight years ago already? You were just a small lad back then. Look at you now. Too much Spider ale, and you've got scabby knuckles from all the fighting you do."

Flent chuckled. "And who are you calling skinny, girl? You were just a gangly little thing yourself fawning over every sea captain coming in to port. Never the first mates, either. She liked the captains best." He gave Thealos a wry smile, seeing the look on his face. Thealos had a difficult time reconciling the pretty serving girl's affection for Flent. "She's my sister, Thealos. We're kindred, no matter what anyone says. When Roye put me to work in the Foxtale, I started keeping my eye on her. Anyone who got too close, and…"

"You left them bleeding out their nose on the back porch," the girl finished for him. "You'd think he was half-hen, half-rooster. Strutting like any freeborn Drugaen, yet he's as motherly as don Rion's queen. I'm surprised I've met anyone these last few years." She nudged him playfully in the ribs.

"Hush," Flent chided. He flushed with pride though. "Just kept the bad ones away, that's all."

"And how many bad ones were there?" Jaerod pressed, smiling.

"Most of them," he shot back with a grin. Gazing over the fire at Jaerod, Flent looked him dead in the eye. "So we're going to Landmoor, Sleepwalker. 'Preciate you looking out for us. I just can't help but thinking – wouldn't we run into more Kiran Thall down there than we would further north?"

"You're not the fool you pretend to be," the Sleepwalker replied with a wry smile. "I'm sorry for the little deception, but it was very likely that anything we said was overheard." Before the serving girl could object, he added, "Thealos and I are going to Landmoor. But we're stopping in Castun first. It's a little village on the north border of the Shadows Wood. I know the innkeeper at the Catpaw Inn, and I'm sure he'll have work for you until things settle down in Sol." He scattered some of the ashes with the stick. The earth was a mixture of dirt and sand. "When Thealos and I finish our business in Landmoor, you can go where you like." His voice trailed off thoughtfully, and then he looked at Thealos. "I learned some things in Sol tonight. Disturbing news. Things are happening much faster than I thought they would. I must leave you. Tonight."

"What?" Thealos demanded, sitting forward with a start. He was aware of Flent and Ticastasy staring at them in confusion.

"If I leave now, I can be in Castun tomorrow. You three would only slow me down." His gray eyes glittered. "I need to make some arrangements before we head down to Landmoor. Before it's too late."

"Too late for what?" Thealos asked angrily. The thought of Jaerod abandoning him struck fear and anger inside him. He wanted to ask more, but he didn't dare voice his concerns. He had no idea where Castun was, or Landmoor for that matter. Jaerod had only asked him to follow, not to find his own way there.

The Sleepwalker snapped the stick in half and tossed it into the fire. He looked at all three of them. Flent and Ticastasy stared back. "There is danger on the road ahead as well as behind us. The Bandit Rebellion is massing an army outside of Landmoor," he explained. "They plan to siege the fortress and provoke a war with Dos-Aralon." He looked at Thealos. "And possibly Avisahn too. We need to get into the city before it falls."

"And when might that happen?" Thealos asked.

Jaerod shook his head. "There is too much to explain tonight, and I don't have time. There are

also too many factors that can affect the answer. When I left the Shoreland, the army was still gathering slowly. But I've heard otherwise tonight. I promise I will tell you the rest of it in Castun. Let me just say that if the Bandit army takes the city before we get there, a good many will die from an unknown sickness. This isn't a plague – it's something even worse. There are forces at work here you do not understand." He rose, his black cloak whipping in the harsh wind. "I must go on alone, Thealos."

"Why can't I go with you?" he demanded in a low voice.

"I can get there much faster alone," Jaerod replied. "You need to hurry. The sooner you can get to Castun, the better for us all."

"Can I talk to you?" Thealos pressed, motioning him away from the fire. He was furious, but held his tongue in front of the others.

Jaerod relented. Together, they left Flent and Ticastasy at the fire's edge and walked down the crunch of sand and stone towards the flat wash of the shore. The blue moon of Eroth was hidden beneath the shroud of Shoreland fog. They walked until the fire was just a tiny prick of light, though still not very far away.

Thealos dug his hands beneath his arms. "You didn't tell me you were going to abandon me with them," he seethed. "What am I? A wet-nurse? I don't understand why we're bringing them in the first place."

Jaerod gave Thealos a stern look. "Because you used the Everoot on the Drugaen, Thealos."

"He was dying!"

"I'm not faulting you for your compassion. But there are consequences with magic. You made a decision without knowing the effects." He sighed, giving Thealos another pointed look. "Using magic like this leaves an impression – a footprint, if you will. Just as there are trackers who can follow a deer through the scrub, there are those who can sniff out the trail of magic. We must bring them to protect you, Thealos. I spoke of powers at work in this valley. These people would kill you if they knew about you."

Thealos swallowed, his anger turning into water.

"The Wolfsmen were waiting for us, which means that the Shae also consider you a big threat. I've stayed with you this long to be sure they didn't follow us right away. We bought a little time slipping out of Sol tonight. The Wolfsmen will have to report the incident to Avisahn and wait for a reply before they will follow us. Speed is essential." He pointed to the firelight. "They will need you to guide them to Castun, Thealos. You're a far better woodsman than either of them."

"But I've never been to Castun," he answered, shaken.

"You'd never fought the Kiran Thall either. But now you have. I have confidence in you, Thealos. But I have no other choice. I need to see the progress of the army to know how much time we have left. If we have any at all."

"And the Crimson Wolfsmen?" Thealos asked. "I can't face one on my own, let alone a quaere if another is sent to track me. Jaerod, I think they can sense where I am through the sword. It is Wolfsman magic. Maybe it is how they found me before."

"They can sense the Silvan magic as easily as you can – but only when they are near. We have a strong lead. If you hurry, you'll reach Castun before they find the trail and start after. I'll be with you if they catch us again."

"You don't understand, Jaerod," Thealos said, shaking his head. "In Sol, I could see the other Wolfsmen through the Silvan Magic in the sword. It bonded us together…like brothers. What if they don't need to track me? What if they can see me right now?"

Jaerod stared at him thoughtfully. "One of the Wolfsmen was killed then."

"Yes." He paused. "How did you know that?"

The Sleepwalker nodded with understanding. "Because the blade uses both magics – life and earth magic. You felt the sword change when the Wolfsman died, didn't you? Life magic is ancient magic, Thealos. Very few of the Shae still know how to use it or invoke it. But when your people came to this world, they taught the Druids about the earth magic and they taught a few about the life magic. Only a few. Life magic is powerful, but it has a greater chance of being used in Forbidden ways." Thealos' eyes widened, but Jaerod soothed him. "The blade you have was forged with Silvan Magic – meaning it uses its magic appropriately. You cannot kill another Shae with that weapon. The blade would reject and burn you if you tried. Now there is something about the Crimson Wolfsmen order that uses life magic as well. When one Wolfsman dies, his life magic is spent and given to strengthen his brothers. Not even Everoot could bring him back. You may never feel that bonding again. It happened because of who Jade Shayler was, not who you are. The blade channels it."

Thealos nodded. "How do you know so much about this?"

"I've told you that already." Smiling, the Sleepwalker put his hand on Thealos' shoulder. "I am a Sleepwalker. I've been to the Druid vaults of Parath-Anatos. Even to the Shae archives in Avisahn…and Landmoor. That's why I never make it a practice to kill a Crimson Wolfsman. The last man of a quaere is strong and quick enough to kill even a Sleepwalker. Remember that."

"So you don't think the Wolfsman can follow me through the bonding?"

"If they could, you would share the connection. You would be able to see them as well. Do you?"

"I hadn't thought of that. Oh for Hate's sake – I'm going to have to start learning to trust you," he added with a reluctant smile. "I suppose you wouldn't abandon us deliberately, and it would be much harder to free me from Nordain's cell if you are wrong, and I won't be much help to anyone locked up." He saw Jaerod's smile and sighed. "Now how do I find Castun? We're on the shores of the Valairus and the Shadows Wood is west…"

"Follow the coastline, but keep near the trees. You won't mistake the Shadows Wood. It's too big to wander by, even with all the cover in the valley floor. Now be careful. The Kiran Thall have increased their patrols in preparation for the invasion. Don't let them find you. But they are looking north for trouble, not east. When you reach the forest, follow the north border until you reach the Iron Point Road. Castun is right there." He gave Thealos a warm smile. "I'll meet you at the Catpaw in a day or two. The owner will be watching for you."

"Do you have any more Everoot?" Thealos asked. "We might need it."

"You can hold it for now," Jaerod answered, reaching into his belt for the wet bundle. "Just remember to keep it wet with fresh water. Every day."

"I will. Be safe, Jaerod."

The Sleepwalker looked at him and nodded before turning and vanishing into the thick mist. Thealos stared after him, trying to pick him out of the haze and gloom. Clutching the moist bag, he stuffed it in his vest and started back towards the camp.

* * *

For hours, the wind surged across the slate-gray sea in the black of night, and shortly before dawn, the sky began to brighten – a little. Thealos awoke to a light pattering of rain from the leaden skies. He had only dozed lightly during the night, huddled beneath a cloak and blanket for warmth.

Rising, he shook out his things and felt the stinging slap of brine on his hands and neck. The fog was inland now, reaching far into the valleys and troughs. He was anxious to reach the shelter of the forest, even one with as dark a reputation as the moors of the Shadows Wood.

"A bright and cheery morning has greeted us," Thealos drawled, jostling the sturdy Drugaen until he stirred. He chafed his hands to dull the sting of the cold. Flent awoke with a yawn and a belch. Thealos gently rocked the serving girl's shoulder and she awoke, her dark hair windblown and straying from its colorful tether.

"It's cold," she murmured, staring at the billowing mist.

"We don't have time for a fire, I'm afraid," he apologized. Thealos opened his travel sack and withdrew some provisions to share. "Not as good as the roast goose last night, but maybe we can convince Flent to share some of his chickpeas." They ate the meal in silence, chewing on the hard biscuits and salt pork without any relish. Flent washed his down with a cup of ale. As the Drugaen and the serving girl packed up their things, Thealos used sapple-dust on the ashes and buried them in the sand with a trowel. Dusting his hands, he slung his pack over his shoulder and strung his bow. He tested its pull and nodded, satisfied.

"It's a long walk," Thealos announced, "But if we make good time, the you'll soon enjoy a feathered mattress and cushions in Castun. We should reach the Shadows Wood before nightfall and Castun the next day if we hurry."

"Good enough, my lord," Ticastasy said, brushing her arms for warmth. "Let's walk."

In the dim dawn light, Thealos led them westward along the shoreline, following the trail of the ocean. Thealos walked slowly enough to keep from being separated from them. The fog shied away completely around noon. Colors lit the valley in shades of green and umber with dazzling fields of yellow wildflowers and blue snap-weeds. Thealos carried the bow on his shoulder, inhaling the fresh scents. He didn't let on that he'd never been here before, trusting in Jaerod's directions and the rumored size of the Shadows Wood.

After stopping for a meal at midday, they continued over a wide range of inland hills. Thealos' legs strained with the climb, but it felt good. Flent had the most trouble keeping up. His thick Drugaen legs were used to the flat streets of Sol. Beyond the third range of hills, a dense black-green forest swallowed up the prairie in front of them. The Shadows Wood, Thealos thought. The only thing higher was the jagged outline of the Kingshadow Mountains behind it on the other side of the valley. Even from the top of the hill, they couldn't see the other end of the wood.

"And I thought the woods of Avisahn were big," Flent muttered, brushing his hands together as he panted. "We've bloody got to cross that?"

Thealos smirked and nodded. "It's broad and ugly, Flent. But it is much smaller than the forests of my homeland." The forests of Avisahn stretched the entire length of the Ravenstone Mountains. He felt a sudden pang of loss, remembering it. The Shadows Wood was probably half its size or less. Next to the bleached brown grass of the prairies and the green oak leaves, the dark tangled vine maple and cedar were ominous. Landmoor was somewhere on the southern edge of the forest, too far to see. He felt a small smile twitch on his mouth and wished he'd been able to send a courier to Nordain at that moment. So sorry I couldn't respond to your summons yet, but the weather has been good and the scenery wonderful. The food isn't as choice as the baking guilds, but then…you already knew that.

Pressing ahead, they reached the forest before sunset. In the Inland valley before the forest, Thealos had found drying mounds of horse droppings and long swaths of trampled grass. The trail led away from the forest. Kiran Thall horsemen, probably. Skirting the path, they came at a quick

pace until they reached the tangled branches of cedar.

Trees loomed around them, punctuated by the angry clicking of beetles and flutter of ravens. Thealos let his heavy travel pack down next to a sapling. He gently crouched and touched the dry stabbing pine needles that carpeted the ground. There was a faint musty smell – the distant murmur of Forbidden magic. He had no idea how far away the sense was coming from, but it did not feel imminent. The forest was not friendly, and he could feel a certain hardness in the stiff crooked branches and the dead needles lying like a rug near the base of the trees. The forest was polluted. He wasn't sure how, but there was something dark afoot. It felt distant, vague.

"Are we going to camp here?" Flent panted. His boots crunched the twigs and needles.

Ticastasy leaned back against a tree. "I'm exhausted. I'm used to walking, but in circles around tables. You must be used to this, young lord."

Thealos hadn't heard her. He brushed the scrub away and pressed his fingers against the dirt. Closing his eyes, he tried to sink into the earth magic, to be one with it. The feeling was always stronger in the woodlands than in the cities. It nagged at him, familiar yet different. Breathing slowly, he tried to sift through his feelings, but they were too tangled, too conflicting. He tried to feel the presence of the Everoot, but something overshadowed it. Something Forbidden.

"Is he asleep?" she asked.

"Maybe he's praying," Flent muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

Thealos opened his eyes and glanced back at them. He rose and brushed his hands together. "A little further. I'm not sure I like the feeling of this place."

"Further?" Flent asked, dropping his sack. "We've been marching…all banned day! My feet have earned a few blisters and I've got rocks in my boots the size of walnuts."

Thealos glanced over at the serving girl. "Are you tired too?"

"I'm exhausted," she said, folding her arms. "I thought that fourth hill was going to kill me."

Thealos wiped his mouth and sighed. "We really should go on, but I guess we can stop here. This whole forest feels wrong. Now, do either of you know how to build a fire without giving off a lot of smoke?" They looked at him blankly. "Set a snare for a rabbit?"

The serving girl cocked her head. "We may be from the city, my lord. But we're not fools. Flent, learn how to light the fire. I'd like to learn how to build a snare."

* * *

A ring of stones crowned the small cook fire, and Thealos adjusted one with the toe of his boot. Thin sheets of smoke wafted up through the trees, obscuring the scattered specks of winking stars. He adjusted the rolled up blanket behind his head and rested his hands comfortably on his chest. Flent unstopped his little cask and poured himself a mug of Spider Ale. He grinned delightedly and started savoring the sips. It was his third, and from the sloshing sound, the cask was nearly empty. The serving girl sat next to the Drugaen, brushing out her tangled hair with a stiff-bristled brush. Thealos watched her, feeling a little jealous of their companionship. He felt like an outsider.

"I'll never get these pants clean," she murmured to Flent, brushing the dust off vigorously. "And I only brought a quick change of clothes with me. I hope they have a decent tailor in Castun."

"And a bath," Flent added. "You smell like a sailor, girl."

She butted him in the ribs and gave him a scolding look. Thealos grinned wolfishly. "Don't tease her, Flent. I've been gagging since you took off your boots."

Ticastasy let out a burst of laughter. It made her eyes crinkle pleasantly as she smiled. He

gave Flent a wink to apologize, but the Drugaen took the drubbing good-naturedly.

"Castun is a trading post," Thealos explained, "But even if they have good wool from the Clothweaver Guild, it'll still cost four times more than it's worth. Here," he said, sitting up and rummaging through his travel pack. Down in the bottom, he wrestled out the bundle wrapped in oilskin that Tomn the cook had bought in Sol. "This doesn't quite fit me anymore," he teased, untying the leather thongs and revealing the rich fabric. He hadn't looked at it since he'd escaped from Tannon's Band. As he lifted the folds, he stared down at the fine wool gown, a rich shade of ochre with a blue and violet trim around the bodice.

"Sweet Achrolese, it's beautiful!" Ticastasy said with delight. She crossed around the fire and sat next to him, staring at it in amazement. "This came from the Green Weaver in Sol, didn't it? How much did it cost?"

"Twenty pieces, if I remember right," Thealos replied dryly. "It's yours."

"I can't take this," she replied, shaking her head. "It's too beautiful. A barter's daughter might wear it, but not a serving girl."

"What am I going to do with it?" Thealos laughed.

She looked at him in disbelief. "Well, you don't really have the right coloring for it," she teased. "But why did you get it? Did you mean it for someone? Was it a gift for the Princess of Avisahn?"

Thealos shook his head. "No, Shae women prefer silk or damask. It's a good quality gown though, look at the stitch-markings. Three, see that?" He showed her the seam and the stitch. "It's worth at least thirty in Dos-Aralon. If you ever wanted to sell it."

Ticastasy eyed him warily. "And you didn't mean this for someone, then?"

He shook his head. "I think it would suit you well."

She folded the fabric reverently and tied it up in the oilskin again. When she finished, she scooted up closer to him. Flent's head was starting to droop down on his chest. The beginnings of a very loud snore were starting to rumble in his throat. She seemed a little more comfortable sitting near him, and he could see his own glowing eyes reflected in hers. Her eyes were an interesting color in the firelight. Cinnamon. He liked that. Rare as a brown-eyed Shae…

"Who are you?" she asked, picking at the scrubs of pine needles.

"What do you mean?"

She nodded. "Back in the Foxtale, you said you were Thealos. Don't the Shae lords have family names too?"

He understood now. "Quickfellow," he answered softly, watching her eyes. Did she know anything about the noble Silvan houses? Would she know that Silverborne or Silvershire or any dozen other names meant royalty in Avisahn? Not Quickfellow – never Quickfellow. He wanted to tell her he was only the son of a barter. He should tell her.

"Quickfellow," she said, nodding pleasantly. "I like that better." She gave him a teasing look. "Thealos is so heady. Doesn't come off the tongue very well. But Quickfellow has a nice sound. Would it offend you if I called you that? I just can't call someone, my lord, not if they can tease Flent about the smell of his socks."

He smiled warmly. "It wouldn't offend me. And what should I call you then? Ticastasy is a mouthful as well."

"Well, Flent calls my 'Stasy. He's the only one who can get away with it." She winked at Thealos playfully. "Up until now. You can call me that too if you want."

"It has a nice sound," he said, smiling. She was sitting close to him, making him a little

uncomfortable. He felt blood rising to his face. Their hands were almost touching. Why had he noticed that? She wasn't Laisha Silverborne by any stretch of Silvan standards. Brown hair and brown eyes, about as human as she could get. Her skin was rich-colored, not pale like the Shae. Her cinnamon eyes would have been unfashionable in his homeland, but they looked well on her.

"You were wearing a pendant last night," he noticed. "Can I see it?"

"Your glowing eyes see too much, Quickfellow." She tugged at her collar and pulled up the gold chain and sparrow, cupping the pendant in her hand for him to see. It glittered in the firelight.

"Pretty. Who gave it to you?"

"Someone I thought was very special to me." She pursed her lips. "He was supposed to see me last week, but never came to port. I've thought about taking it to a goldsmith to melt down and turned into earrings instead." She shrugged and huffed. "Maybe I'm not as important to him after all."

Thealos nodded understandingly. "He's a fool then."

"You think so?" she replied, flattered. She sidled up a little closer. Her fingers grazed his. She scooped the pendant down her shirt again and shook her head. "You surprise me, Quickfellow. Most of the Shae I've met aren't nearly as well-mannered. I appreciate your kindness in looking after us."

The blade of Jade-Shayler flared awake at his hip. Tingles of Silvan magic sent a warning thrust of heat through his body. Then he smelled it, seeping into the small camp, coiling in the air like smoke. Not from their campfire. The smell was strong. Forbidden Magic. He knew it instinctively.

"Something is wrong," he warned, putting his hand on her shoulder as he rolled into a defensive crouch. He slid the blade from his belt and felt it lick at his hand hungrily. He began to draw its magic inside him, preparing himself.

"What is it?" she whispered, staying perfectly still.

"I don't know," he replied in a low voice, trying to get a sense of how close the danger was. He could feel it, thick and alive. And coming closer. He turned around and scanned the treeline. Not there.

Looking over the serving girl's shoulder, Thealos saw a dark-armored Drugaen just outside the full light of the campfire.

XVII

There was no battle cry or hiss of warning, just ice-white eyes. A Drugaen warrior stood in the shadows, clenching a tapered short sword marked with strange runes. The slender blade glinted wickedly in the firelight, and the chill of Forbidden magic swept over the grove. His eyebrows twitched with fury and an unmistakable expression of hate contorted his mouth. He came at Flent and raised the weapon up to kill.

Thealos sprang forward. He whipped his Silvan blade around, the magic sending shocks of fire up his arm. The armored warrior was different than any Thealos had seen, but he had heard similar descriptions coming from frightened barters out of the Ravenstone. The warrior had pale eyes, a soot-colored beard, and slender eyebrows. His armor was the highest quality steel, sculpted with designs of twisting vines and skulls. A huge buckle made of white gold was emblazoned with an upside-down oak leaf.

The weapons sparked and jolted as they clashed, arcing with power and magic. Forbidden met Silvan. Thealos felt his arm go numb with the shock of power, and the stench of the offending magic burned in his nose. The Drugaen reeked of it.

With reflexes of a trained warrior, the dark Drugaen stepped in and backhanded Thealos with a gauntleted fist. The short sword whipped around and would have sliced him open from navel to throat, but the magic of the Silvan weapon saved him again. Flickering memories from a Crimson Wolfsman's life swarmed in Thealos' mind. The Druagen hammered on him ruthlessly, the white eyes deadly and hateful. Thealos held him off, dazed by the quickness and ferocity of the attack. The fleeting images of the dead Wolfsman overpowered what he knew about sword-fighting, but it was just enough to parry the blows. Even with the magic, he was outmatched – and he knew it. Backing away, he nearly stumbled in the wooded glen. He saw Flent rise up behind his attacker.

The Sheven-Ingen axe bit into the Drugaen's armor from behind. Thealos ducked to the side, trying to save his own life. The Drugaen shrugged off Flent's blow and wheeled around to face him. He snorted, grinning with loathing and hate, and lunged forward with the dark magic. The short sword spit sparks as it slashed and glanced off the axe. Flent held his ground, using the flat of the blade to parry the attacker's strokes. He swept at the armored foe's neck twice but missed as his opponent ducked the blow and countered.

Thealos had a clear shot at the warrior's back. He saw that Flent's axe had split the armor open, leaving a black mesh of tangled mail. The armored Drugaen seemed to sense Thealos' approach and whirled on him, keeping both men back. Thealos swore under his breath. A Krag Drugaen from the deep Ravenstone. They were the enemies of the Shae and the Drugaen Nation. What in Vannier's name was he doing this far south? They never left the mountains – at least, not that he'd heard of.

The Krag feinted with a sword thrust and then kicked Thealos in the stomach. The air rushed out of Thealos' lungs with the force of the steel-shod boot. He couldn't breathe. The Krag slashed his wrist and the Wolfsman blade thumped to the ground, the magic abandoning him as soon as it left his touch. Pain and nausea smothered him and he crumpled, grabbing frantically for his weapon.

"You white-eyed craven…!" Flent roared, tackling the Krag from behind. The two rolled in the carpet of dead needles, thrashing and fighting. Flent was young and strong, but the armored Krag was a trained warrior. He flipped the stocky Flent over his shoulder and slammed him heavily on the ground.

Thealos grabbed his blade with his left hand, felt the Silvan magic rush to fill the void it had left. He struggled against the surge of power, tried to tame it and control it, to feed it with his need. The blade burned with blue fire, invoking a rage and hatred Thealos had never felt before. But that was dangerous – he had learned it with Tannon's Band. Giving in to the anger made him careless. The Krag wouldn't be brought down easily. He had to remember that. Thealos's stomach still hurt, but the pain was washing away beneath the waves of surging power.

Thealos wiped his eyes and blinked, then nearly shouting out a warning as he saw Ticastasy sneaking up behind the Krag with her knife.

The Krag slammed Flent's face down into the ground. Then he withdrew, wheeling on the girl. She looked frightened but kept a firm hold on her dagger. Gripping the blood-smeared blade, he stalked her, shifting the weapon from hand to hand. He swiped at her twice, but she managed to dodge it, luring the warrior away from Flent.

"Leave him alone," she warned, her voice trembling.

Thealos staggered forward, clutching his stomach. Blood dripped from his wrist. Abruptly, from beyond the firelight, he heard the clatter and crunch of hooves in the forest. Sweet Vannier, no! Not the Kiran Thall. Not now. He gazed off into the dark woods. How much time did he have? Glancing back at Ticastasy, he hesitated. Flent was unconscious, his face a mess of blood and scratches. He would not be able to help. But Thealos had other magic. Magic the Krag didn't have. Reaching into his vest, he withdrew the sack of Everoot and untied it. He snapped off a stub of the plant and chewed it, feeling the rush of relief as it healed him. It was a different feeling this time, adding a rawness that thrilled him. He knew the Krag wouldn't be able to hurt him now, not with the taste of the Everoot in his mouth. He straightened, feeling his energy return. The cut in his wrist vanished, and he switched the blade to his other hand.

Ticastasy shifted her grip on the knife. She watched the Krag as Thealos drew up behind him. She gave him a quick glance and a deft nod.

"You're a little short for her kind," Thealos said, calling the Krag after him. "I haven't finished with you yet, Krag."

The warrior turned and glared at him. He said nothing but started towards Thealos again.

Thealos tightened his grip on the blade. He felt strong and alive. "You don't wish to discuss terms first?" He saw her heft the dagger, ready to throw it. The Krag stalked closer. Thealos nodded back.

Ticastasy threw her dagger at the Drugaen's head.

The Krag reacted instantly, raising his arm to deflect the blow. The dagger struck off the arm bracer, spinning into the trees. In that moment, Thealos attacked him from behind. He felt the power of a Crimson Wolfsman. The tip of Jade-Shayler's blade screeched against metal, slicing through the steel with twisting shrieks of blue magic. The Krag's chest exploded in a spurt of fire and scorched steel. Thealos clamped his arm around the Krag's throat and drove the blade in up to the hilt, feeling the Silvan magic overwhelm the Forbidden, crushing its spark and power. Smoke chafed from the wound and the Krag sunk low, twitching with agony before dropping dead at Thealos' feet.

The horse hooves came at a low ride, snapping through the twigs and fallen branches. Thealos motioned for Ticastasy to get behind him as he prepared to stand against the intruders. He was confident he could take them all now. Firelight glinted off the polished armor as a huge roan lumbered into the camp. A knight, not a Kiran Thall. Ticastasy breathed in quick gulps and sighed with relief.

"It's Sturnin Goff," she said. "Thank the stars. I thought Secrist had found us."

The knight reined in and shed the stirrups, landing with a jangle of spurs and armor. His eyes never left Thealos. Thealos stared at the leaf-blade in his hand. The metal was clean of blood, glimmering a blue shade in the darkness.

From the saddle harness, the knight unslung a heavy double-handed sword. "Where's the Sleepwalker?" he demanded.

Thealos studied his face. "What do you want?"

"Don't fuss with me, lad," he snapped. "The Krag never travel alone. Kick out the fire. Quickly, just do it!"

Thealos stared at the knight. "Who are…?"

"We don't have time to argue about this, lad. Killing a Krag is a foolhardy thing to do. Now put out the fire. The others will be close behind."

Thealos' confidence in himself guttered out. There were more? He listened, then obeyed, throwing a handful of sapple dust to quickly snuff out the flames. He kicked in the ashes quickly, and closed the stones over the embers. Darkness washed over the camp. The whispers of the forest were haunting. He tried to sense more Forbidden magic, but the Krag's weapon gave off such a stench he could not smell past it.

"Flent? Can you hear me?" Ticastasy knelt by her friend.

"Yeah," he muttered angrily, sitting up. He mopped the blood on his face with his sleeve. "Banned Krag. As ugly as I'd heard they were. Never thought I'd get a chance to fight one."

"Here, take some of this," Thealos said, breaking off another stub of Everoot. "Chew it quickly. It will take away the pain." It was dark now, blacker than ink.

The knight crunched through the pine needles. "So the Sleepwalker abandoned you out here, did he?"

"We weren't abandoned," Thealos countered. "The Krag stumbled into our camp. The fire was still pretty bright, so it wasn't that difficult to see us. Foolish to light one in the first place."

"You know what they say about a Drugaen's eyesight. They'd have seen you in the dark just as well. There will be at least five or so more." The knight took the charger's reins and patted its neck. It grunted and snorted, stamping its hoof. "A Sleepwalker would have avoided the whole company." He swore under his breath. "Never had to fight off more than three before." He looked over at Flent. "But you're a sturdy lad, and the Shae has a decent weapon. That might count for something."

"Why did it want to kill Flent?" Ticastasy asked. "He…he just came into the firelight and attacked us."

"The Krag hate other Drugaen," Thealos explained angrily. "They've been fighting in the Ravenstone for years. I thought they were just a political faction trying to take over the government. I had no idea they'd be involved in something this far south." He watched Flent approach the body of the Krag warrior. The tapered short sword lay nearby.

"Don't touch it," Thealos warned. "It's Forbidden magic." He walked over and crouched near it, feeling his stomach revolt. "I don't see any ornamentation. They must have used blood in the tempering." He shook his head with disgust. "I can't just leave it here."

"You can do all the rites you want later," the knight said. "They'll kill you and the Drugaen lad without so much as a whisper."

"Why?" Ticastasy asked, her voice fearful.

"We supported the Drugaen Nation at first," Thealos replied, "But the fighting is fiercest deep down in the mountains. That's not our best ground. The Drugaen resent us now for not helping

them drive the Krag out, and the Krag hate us for selling weapons and armor to their enemies." He glanced over at the knight. "I wasn't aware that Owen Draw even knew about the Krag."

"There are caves in the Kingshadow too," the knight replied gruffly. "And they openly support the Bandit Rebellion. That makes them our enemies too, doesn't it?" Using his boot, he kicked the Krag over on its back. "Shadowoak," he muttered. "Their best." The white gold symbol on its buckle glimmered. "But you're right, Shae. They shouldn't be this far south. Unless Ballinaire is drawing in all his forces."

Thealos stared at the knight in the darkness, his vision good enough to see the lines on his face. He remembered the man from the Foxtale Inn in Sol, and how he had challenged Secrist and the company of Kiran Thall. Obviously, the knight had been tracking them across the coast. The oppressive stink of Forbidden magic wafted in the air again, coming from the woods. Like cinders and spoiled meat. "You're right. More are coming." Thealos stared off into the dark folds of the forest. The smell of Forbidden magic wavered in the air like smoke, difficult to tell which direction it came from. He did not want to leave the body and the weapon untended, but he did not have time to dispose of them both properly. "We'd better leave."

"Oh, it's too late for that," the knight answered, yanking the tether and dragging the horse towards Ticastasy. "Mount up, girl. We'll hold them here. Better be away from here in case we can't."

"What?" she demanded.

"No time to argue with you," he said gruffly, hoisting her by the waist onto the saddle. "The Shadowoak fight in sixes. There are five more coming. Maybe more. Got to find out why they are down here and you'll only get in the way."

"Get in the way?" she seethed. "You don't have to…"

"Wait a minute. If we hurry…" Thealos interrupted. He didn't like the way the knight had charged in and started ordering them around. "We might be able to gain ground. They're short and can't match our stride."

"Is this the first Krag you've faced, Shae?" the knight asked, pointing at the dead one.

Thealos swallowed and met his stare. "Yes."

The knight shook his head and muttered impatiently. "You've got to kill all six," he warned. "You leave one alive, and they'll hunt you down to the last man with as many Krag as it takes. They drink revenge like Spider ale. We've killed one – their point scout. Even if we tried to run, they would catch us before the night is through. If we have to fight, I'd rather it be on our terms. Not theirs."

"I'm ready to kill a few," Flent said menacingly, patting his hand with the axe. He spat on the ground.

"Good," the knight approved. "Now get your bow out, Shae. I can't handle five on my own. You've got to bring a few down. Have any bodkins?"

"A quiver full," Thealos replied, sheathing his blade in his belt. "Are you sure we can't outrun them?"

"Can you fly?" the knight barked. "Only have one horse."

"Why are you even here?" Thealos demanded.

"Because of you, Shae. You know something about what's going on in the Shoreland. You and the Sleepwalker. Now get going, girl! I didn't follow you here to get killed by Shadowoak."

Thealos looked up at Ticastasy and gripped her hand. "Ride to Castun," he told her.

"But…"

"For the love of Shenalle, just do it!" He squeezed her hand. "Find Jaerod. We may need him."

* * *

The Shadows Wood was aptly named, Thealos thought worriedly, hunched forward in the dry carpet of needles and scrub. He pulled his shooting glove on snug and then stuck four arrows in the ground nearby within easy reach. He readied a single bodkin arrow in the thick linen string of his bow. A bodkin could go through plate armor more easily than broad heads. Just like hunting an elk, he tried to remind himself. But his stomach did not accept the lie so easily. Flent knelt next to him, staring into the darkness and resting his arms on the Sheven-Ingen axe. The wind rustled through the treetops, sending a few pinecones crashing down. The knight from Owen Draw propped himself behind a thick twisted cedar.

"There they are," Flent whispered, peering into the blackness. Thealos didn't see anything yet, but he followed the Drugaen's stubby finger. He'd always heard that nothing could beat a Drugaen's eyes in the dark.

Thealos hunkered down low, smelling the hidden reek of Forbidden magic drift closer. He felt the presence of the Krag moments later as they emerged from the depths of the undergrowth. There was another scent in the air, something more familiar. Straining against the night, he tried to see what it was.

"Three…four….there – there's the fifth. Looks like he's dragging a prisoner." Flent pitched his voice as mild as a whisper. "Yeah, they're pulling him along by the wrists. Thin fellow." He cocked his head. "Heading straight to our camp. What do you want to do?"

"Ambush from the flanks," the knight said softly. "They can probably see as well as you can. Aim well, Shae. You've got to take a few down before they reach us."

Thealos wasn't listening. He saw them now, weaving through the black trees in small number, marching with a determined pace. "They have a Shae prisoner," he murmured.

"How can you tell?" Flent asked, squinting. "He's got a hood on…"

"Trust me," Thealos answered. He nodded to the knight. "I have an idea."

"Make it quick," he replied gruffly.

"Flent, duck low and hurry over there. When I bring down the first two, yell in challenge so they can see you." He looked up at the knight. "When they charge him, strike from the trees. I'll slip around and free the Shae before they can kill him."

The knight thought a moment and nodded. "You think like a battle commander. Get moving, Flent. Hurry now, go!"

Flent scurried off, keeping low in the brush. Thealos gathered his arrows and veered into the trees, stepwalking silently and carefully to avoid the needles and dried twigs. He kept low and dodged from tree to tree. Taking cover behind a gnarled cedar choked with moss, he peered around, watching the Krag Drugaen warriors approach the remains of their camp. He set the arrows in the dirt in front of him. Taking a deep breath, he raised the hunting bow, sighting the leader.

Glancing to the side, Thealos made sure the knight and Flent were in place. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and watched the leader again. He repeated the lie again in his mind, trying to quell the nervousness and fear inside him. Many times, he had brought down deer and even elk at a distance. The Krag were even closer. He would not miss. The memory of Tannon's band haunted him, and he bit it back, squelching it. How many arrows would he get in before they scattered

and sought cover. Three? Maybe four? They marched single file, a row of armored warriors with the peculiar white gold oak-leaf buckle. Trailing with the last man. The slender Shae walked head down, ducking beneath the low-hanging boughs and branches. He was the smallest man Thealos had ever seen, almost gangly. He wore a dark cloak and long skirting robes. Or maybe it was a woman?

Raising the bow, he let his vision fade – feeling the connection between himself and the lead Drugaen. He pulled the arrow back to his ear. The space between tied them together, a single point of time and distance. He forgot his fear. The arrow hummed, finding its target with a thud and shock. The Drugaen went down, clutching a shattered knee. Ban it, too low!

Before his second arrow took flight, four tapered short swords glowed in the darkness as the Krag reacted to the attack. Thealos let another arrow fly and struck the second in the chest. He heard the armor ping, and wasn't sure if the sharp head had penetrated the steel or not.

Flent roared the rallying cry of the Drugaen Nation, brandishing the Sheven-Ingen axe. "For Faradin and Eroth!"

The trailing Krag slammed the hilt of his short sword against the captive Shae, dropping him like a stone and probably killing him. Thealos seethed a curse, unable to fix the man quickly enough. The Krag scattered four different directions, but they charged Flent in a swarm.

Flent let out a throaty challenge. "Come as one or take your turns! I've got a whooping for each of you."

Thealos fixed another arrow and let it loose, catching the nearest Krag in the arm. The arrow transfixed his arm, but it didn't slow the attacker. Grabbing another, he let it fly. The Krag went down, the shaft buried in his neck. Only three left. From the huge cedar tree, the knight from Owen Draw swung around, knocking another flat with his double-handed sword. With no room to press the advantage with his bow, Thealos sprinted around the side, hurrying to the fallen Shae.

When he reached the still body, Thealos felt for a pulse while tugging the bag of Everoot loose from his tunic pocket. Blood trickled from the wounded Shae's pale forehead, matting the silver hair with a dark stain. The Shae's heartbeat was a dull throb, growing slower and slower. Cursing himself for not being quicker, Thealos removed a handful of Everoot and pressed it against the bleeding scalp. Silvan magic shot through him, exploding in his ears like the purest strains of music. He looked over his shoulder, watching as Flent and the knight fought off the remaining two Krag. Both fought back to back, hammering at the wicked glint of the short swords.

The Shae at Thealos' feet stiffened, blue eyes wide with shock. He was handsome with long, silverish hair, but so thin he was almost gaunt. Had the Krag starved him? The Shae looked up at Thealos in amazement and then raised his hand, as if he were going to choke him. Thealos recoiled when the rush of earth magic swept from the Shae's hand. It came out as a streak of blue light and swept past him, catching the Krag with the shattered knee as he struggled up behind Thealos to kill him. The light hammered into the white-gold marking, throwing the Krag like a windblown leaf into a huge pine. He impacted violently against the bark, and when he collapsed to the earth, his armor was nothing but a smoking black char of twisted metal and gaping ash. The blue light sizzled, spreading across the armor, consuming it whole.

A Shae Warder!

Thealos stared at him in awe. The bloody gash in his head was gone, folded over and healed. On his feet quickly, spreading his robes, the Shae stepped around Thealos and raised both hands. Twin bolts of blue light flashed out again, smashing the other two Krag Drugaen from behind. Both shuddered from the blast and roared with pain and horror as the blue light ate their armor, charring

their skin and swallowing them. Then the fire was gone, leaving only smoking gray ashes. The Shae looked down, breathing in heavy gulps. He nearly collapsed in a faint as if he'd run ten leagues. Using the magic had exhausted him.

"Thank you," the stranger whispered to Thealos in Silvan. "Thank you for saving me."

"I know you're a Warder, but who are you?" Thealos demanded, steadying the man.

The Shae clutched his head, shaking it. "My name is…" He winced and shuddered. "My name is…I am…" His face contorted with anger and desperation. "I am the Warder Shae of Jenterhome. My name is…" He looked at Thealos in a panic. "By Shenalle, why can't I remember it?"

XVIII

They gathered the remains of the Krag and their weapons into a heap, and the nameless Warder Shae summoned the earth magic again. He opened his hands and seemed to draw the power into the mound of the dead as he breathed in. Blue fire scorched and consumed the remains of the Krag Drugaen, leaving a black scorch mark on the forest floor. The sharp tang of dross stung Thealos' nose as he watched the embers gutter out. Flent snorted and scuffed his boot in the ashes. The Krag Drugaen and their dark magic were no more. The Warder Shae lowered his hands. His eyes glowed in the firelight, speaking of his heritage as much as the pale skin and silver hair.

"Will there be others?" Thealos asked as he began covering the scorched earth with sapple dust and forest debris. The other Shae shook his head.

"There was only this company," he replied. "The rest returned to the Ravenstone earlier."

Thealos nodded. He still hadn't determined the stranger's age. He was young, but certainly well into manhood. Ten or twelve Silvan years old perhaps. He glanced at the knight from Owen Draw. "He said that this was the only company of Krag. I wasn't expecting your arrival, master knight, but I wanted to thank you for your warning and your help." Thealos extended his hand. "I am Thealos of Avisahn. If you hadn't warned us, we all would have died tonight."

"No need for thanks, Shae," the knight replied gruffly. His grip was iron. "You raised your weapon in a tavern in Sol, don't forget. Consider my debt repaid."

"Flent Shago," the Drugaen introduced himself, cocking his thumbs in his belt. He nodded respectfully to the knight before looking at the Shae stranger. "What's his name?" he asked Thealos.

"He doesn't remember."

"Why'd they take him prisoner?"

Thealos asked the question in Silvan. The Shae's eyes were a bright azure and they glittered with fury. "They were taking me to the Ravenstone to work the mines." He gritted his teeth at the memory. "I had planned to escape near Avisahn."

"I thought you were their prisoner?" Thealos said.

"I let them believe that, rather than wander the valley alone. Had I not found you first, I would have destroyed them near the Trident River. I seek the help of the Shae King."

"Why?"

The Warder Shae looked at the others warily. "We will speak later, my brother."

Thealos nodded. Trust was not easy to earn. "They wanted to bring him back to the Krag Nation. He's grateful we found him first." Rubbing his hands together briskly, he looked back at the other Shae, wondering why he didn't appear to understand the king's common. He had looked completely baffled as Sturnin and Flent spoke. His robes were certainly a different style than any Thealos had seen in all his years in the house of a barter.

Flent nodded and sniffed. "Well, he needs a name. Can't go around saying calling him a stump or a stone as they say. How about Justin." Thealos looked at him curiously. Flent shrugged. "I knew a Shae lad in Astillon. Sickly boy – kind of reminds me of him."

Thealos looked at the frail Shae thoughtfully. "The Drugaen would call you Justin. Would that offend you?"

"No," he replied. "This one is a fool, but harmless. Tell him that I thank him for the new name."

Thealos smiled. "Looks like you've made a friend, Flent. Justin will do." Flent beamed and

gave the frail Shae a quick nod. Turning to Sturnin Goff, Thealos gave him a level look. The night air rustled as a heavy wind shook the upper limbs of the pines. "Now… why don't we clear a few things up? Why have you been tracking the Sleepwalker?"

He shook his head and chuckled. "Can't track a Sleepwalker, lad. I've been tracking you."

The quirk of a smile twitched on Thealos' mouth. "You still haven't answered my question."

The knight gave him a hard look. "You prefer bluntness. Very well. You're green, lad. Green as fresh cut wood. I don't say it to insult you, but I watched what happened back in Sol. And tonight. You carry a blade you barely know how to use. Your hands tell me you're a rich man's son. And you dress like any number of Shae barters I've seen across the river. Maybe I was a little too curious what you are doing this side of the Trident with a Sleepwalker. Either you're paying him a lot of coin for some kind of work, or he's pulling you along by the ear." His green-gray eyes flashed. "I think it's the latter."

Thealos stared at him, at a loss for words. He felt anger rising in his chest, but he kept it under control. "Dragging me by the ear you say?" he replied with an edge to his voice.

"I'm a plain speaking man, lad. I've seen a Sleepwalker or two in my days. One could have killed all six Krag before your friend there got whumped on the head. Sleepwalkers are dangerous. Now, I've heard that the Gray Legion has spies working in the Rebellion. But if they're paying for Sleepwalkers too, that means trouble for Dos-Aralon. We wouldn't want the king slain in his bed in the middle of the keep by some black-clothed life-thief. But they cost a great deal, and only the Shae have that kind of money. Again, maybe I'm too curious. Either way, I will have answers from you." His voice was soft, his eyes accusing.

"You tracked me across the Shoreland to ask if I hired an assassin to kill your king? And if Jaerod had been here would you still have approached the camp?"

"Of course. I thought he was with you," the knight replied. "Don't get me wrong, I have a healthy respect for Sleepwalkers. Just as I have a healthy respect for the Crimson Wolfsmen." He gave Thealos a small chuckle. "But I sent a warning to Dos-Aralon in any case about the two of you with word that I'd try and follow along. Whatever the Bandits might be paying for something like that, you can be sure Dos-Aralon can counter any offer."

Thealos folded his arms. "I won't speak treason against your king, Sturnin Goff. I may not like the king of Dos-Aralon, but I have no reason to want him dead. Besides, we're not exactly going that direction."

"Then why are you in the Shoreland? Those Wolfsmen in Sol weren't looking for me."

Thealos felt a little exasperated. "You expect a confession? I'm not a fool, nor am I part of your country. What were you doing in Sol? That's a long way from Owen Draw."

"I was in the Foxtale for a reason, lad. The Duke of Owen Draw was given a message that the Bandit Commander of the Shoreland Regiment wanted to meet the Knight General in Sol. We've heard there have been some conflict between the leaders. The message didn't say anything about Kiran Thall." He cocked his head, his eyes boring hard in Thealos'. "The Knight General sent me to see if this was a Gray Legion ruse or not. And for my trouble, I got attacked by a company of Kiran Thall. Now I'm asking you again, boy. Do you have any idea what you're dealing with out here? Sleepwalkers don't just wander the Shoreland. Was it chance we happened to be in the same tavern that night? Out with it."

"So you were sent to meet with a Bandit Commander?" Thealos hedged, feeling his stomach tighten in knots. He remembered that Jaerod had left him on the streets of Sol to meet with someone. Confusion welled up in his mind. He needed time to sort this out and not look like a fool in

front of the others. "You are suggesting that Jaerod is involved with the Bandit Rebellion and want to know if the Shae are as well?"

"Can you give me any reason to believe he isn't?" the knight pressed.

At the moment, Thealos could not and was glad when Flent interrupted.

"Hopefully your duke didn't pay in gold to hear those Gray Legion lies," Flent huffed disdainfully. "I've been working at the Foxtale for eight years. I know all the regulars." He waved his hand and chuckled. "A Bandit Commander? In Sol? We get Sheven-Ingen pirates, drunken wrecks from Copperyon and even farther. But the Foxtale ain't a Bandit hideout. That was the first time the Kiran Thall ever came into our place."

"What about the Sleepwalker?" Sturnin challenged.

"Sure he is a Sleepwalker," the Drugaen answered with a shrug. "And what law in Dos-Aralon is there about being a Sleepwalker? The man has stopped by over the last few months, but only to talk and play Bones. Maybe he's a spy, but he's no Bandit general."

"Then maybe he knows where I can find him," the knight replied. "You sent the girl riding to Castun. I'm assuming he's there."

Thealos felt trapped and cursed himself. "He said… he would leave a message for us there."

The knight smirked. "You're a bad liar. Surprises me, coming from a Shae. But I suppose we'll see soon enough when we reach the trading post. You see, I'll find out one way or another." He cocked one of his eyebrows. "Now why don't you tell me why those Wolfsmen were after you?"

"You don't really think I'm going to tell you, do you?" Thealos countered, meeting the knight's stare with his own.

The knight paused, feeding the air with tension. Finally, he muttered something under his breath and shook his head. "If you were drowning in a river and I was on shore, I'd toss you a rope." Sturnin's voice softened. "Don't haggle that it's too coarse. If your intentions are good, I'd like to help you get out."

Thealos sighed. "I appreciate the gesture. I know more than I can say right now. But I'm a good swimmer despite what you may think about my swordsmanship." He paused and stared down at his boots, steeling himself. He looked up at Sturnin again. "And maybe you and your king are in the river and haven't realized it yet."

* * *

Thealos and the others marched up and down the undulating hills just within the borders of the Shadows Wood. Sweat streaked down Thealos' face, and he mopped it up with his sleeve. He glanced backwards, watching Flent struggle to keep up, his thick legs leaving him slightly behind. The Drugaen had tried early that morning to teach Justin how to play Bones, but the game was lost on the older Shae, who smiled bemusingly at him and made all the wrong moves. Sturnin Goff walked with his sword strapped across his back. He was sweating heavily in the glinting armor, but he was stronger and more fit than any of them and marched without complaint. They stopped to rest at midday, savoring the break from the humid, scorching air.

Sitting on a crooked stump, Thealos withdrew his water flask and carefully doused the sack of Everoot with it. Then he splashed some of the river water on the back of his neck and savored the coolness. As it dripped down his back, he watched the Warder Shae approach him warily.

"You have it," Justin said.

Thealos cocked his head curiously, cinching the bag strings and stuffing the bundle in his

tunic. "Have what?" he replied in Silvan.

"A connection with earth magic." His pale face was the only one not dripping with sweat, and he looked almost cold in his dark blue robes. Thealos studied his long, narrow fingers – bony and elegant – then opened his cloak wide to reveal the blade of Jade-Shayler. The Shae's eyes gleamed and he nodded, looking at the weapon respectfully.

"Last night, I felt the magic nearby," he said. "I knew you were there, before you attacked. Are you one of the Shae Guardians?"

Thealos shook his head. "No, I am not. I found this magic, and I feel some of it working in me when I use it. What do you know of it?"

The frail man squatted near the stump Thealos sat on. "I have kinship with the ones who forged it. It was made with the skill of my kind. The Shae Warders."

Thealos looked at him curiously. "I know of the Sian Council in Avisahn, but I did not know there were Warders living down here…"

Justin shook his head, forestalling him. "I am certainly not from Avisahn. Tell me – who is the Shae King today?"

"What do you mean, today?" Thealos asked, confused. "King Silverborne has ruled for nearly sixty Silvan years; surely you are not that old."

Justin smirked. "He was a young man when I last knew of him. Does he have any sons? Who is his heir?"

"But that doesn't make any sense," Thealos scoffed, "You are scarcely older than I am!"

"You do not understand the nature of the Shae Warders. We do not live as long as the rest of the Shae as a price for the powers we invoke. I, myself, have lived out twenty Silvan years. No more. But I have not seen Eroth's light for many years…I have slept in the earth magic protecting the Warding that I was called to protect."

Thealos stared at him in disbelief and leaned forward. "And what Warding were you called to protect?" he demanded softly, but he thought he knew already. Justin was talking about the Everoot. He was certain of it.

"I cannot tell you," the frail Shae said slowly. "It is a secret I must guard until I can remember my charge. I know what I am, but not who I am. I remember snatches from the past, back before the great wars. When I awoke, I remember being caught by the Krag in the ruins of my watchpost, not knowing what had transpired to bring about its desolation. My memory has been…razed. Whether it is due to my long sleep or not, I do not know. I was summoned back to my Warding. But I do not remember when or how. You must take me to the Shae King."

"Why?"

Justin shook his head. "I do not know. But I'm sure the answers I seek are in the archives of the Shae King. I ask again, my friend. Who has survived these many years? Who leads the Shae now?"

Thealos slung his travel pack loose and set it down next to him. He mopped his neck and throat. "Silverborne's daughter, Laisha. She rules the Shae in her father's name. He had a son, a great one. When I was a small boy, he was killed during the Purge Wars."

"The Purge Wars?"

Thealos looked at him in amazement. "When the Shae and the King of Dos-Aralon drove the Bandit armies out of the Shoreland..."

"Dos-Aralon?" Justin asked, confused. "'Dos' means there was another before it. When was the old?"

"You truly do not know what happened?"

"I swear by the goddess Shenalle, whom I serve."

Thealos was baffled by the Shae Warder's ignorance. He was certain Jaerod would know what he was talking about. But too many years had passed. The humans and the Shae were allies instead of enemies. He could see Justin's hatred for humans in the way he glared loathingly at Sturnin Goff. Tensions between the races must have been even stronger back then. How was he going to convince him to speak with a Sleepwalker?

"I will tell you what I can, but there is a man you should meet. A man called Jaerod."

"A human?" Justin said, wrinkling his nose.

Thealos sighed. "He knows the ways and history of our people. He has visited many of the Shae watchposts and studied from their archives. He may know who you are."

"The language of man has changed too much over the centuries," the frail Shae hedged. "I can barely understand the Drugaen tongue that the Krag spoke."

"Jaerod speaks Silvan," Thealos promised.

The Warder Shae paused, uncertain. "I do not think this is wise. Perhaps I should go on to Avisahn alone. I will find my answers there."

"The village we travel to isn't far. Go with us that far. Perhaps more of your memory will return with time."

"If you think it is wise, my friend," he answered with a nod. He rose with a slight trembling. Staring up at the dark tangles of trees, the Shae pulled the hood tighter and waited for Thealos to stand.

As they started walking again towards the village of Castun, Thealos wrestled with his thoughts. Sturnin had given him too many conflicting words, making him doubt Jaerod's loyalty a little. He did not like feeling that way. But what did he really know coming from a realm of rumors and gossip? How many of the pieces actually worked together instead of conflicted? He thought about it a moment. A Bandit army was preparing to siege Landmoor – he had learned that from Jaerod. It seemed that Sturnin Goff was aware of some of the Bandit movements as well. There was a grove of Everoot somewhere nearby, and the Bandits had discovered it. Only Jaerod had known that. The Shae were needed to retrieve a lost talisman that would protect them from the dangers inherent in earth magic being used in Forbidden ways. That was the secret he could not share. And Justin – or whatever his true name was – had been the guardian of a Warding, a work of magic created to protect something. The talisman or the Everoot itself?

As he walked and crunched in the matting of pine needles and shrubs, Thealos felt something pulling at his heart, tugging him inextricably south. He hadn't seen it before, not when he was in bonds with Tannon's Band. Or when he escaped the Crimson Wolfsmen in Sol. But he could see it now, as clearly as the sun's hot smile. There was something pulling him south.

To Landmoor.

He knew for certain that the events unfolding in his life had not been random encounters. No, it was all too cleverly worked out for that. The gods were at work. And they were using him.

To be continued in the September 2002 issue of *Deep Magic*...